

THE FORGOTTEN KINGDOM SERIES
FOUR GEMS, FOUR REALMS, ONE FORGOTTEN KINGDOM



THE BEAST PRINCESS

BEAUTY
AND THE BEAST
REIMAGINED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LICHELE SLATER

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To Kelly Stepp

For being alongside me every step of the way.

Thank you for being my #1 fan!

THE FORGOTTEN KINGDOM SERIES

The Four Stones of Tern Tovan
(Prequel to The Forgotten Kingdom Series)

The Dragon Princess
(Sleeping Beauty Reimagined)

The Siren Princess
(Little Mermaid Reimagined)

The Beast Princess
(Beauty and the Beast Reimagined)

The Phoenix Princess—coming 2020
(Snow White Reimagined)

The Crown Prince—coming 2020

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ONE

THERE WAS A SOFT KNOCK ON THE DOOR BEFORE IT OPENED
“Are you busy?”

I placed my finger between the pages of my book before I closed the cover and lifted my head. “What do you think?”

“I’m a little nervous about Ulrich arriving.” My older brother ignored my annoyed expression. “I haven’t seen him since the summer ball.”

“And?”

“What if he’s still mad at me?”

I rolled my eyes. “Keltin, didn’t you make up at the summer ball? After you kissed him and returned him to his princely form?”

Keltin stopped pacing and turned to me. “Well . . . yes.” He lowered his hands.

“Then you’re fine. Ulrich doesn’t hold on to grudges. I just hope his sister doesn’t come,” I mumbled, reopening my book. “I can’t stand pirates.”

“You can’t exactly stand anyone not royalty.” Keltin walked over and sat on the arm of my chair. “What story are you devouring today?”

“Oh, just a tale of a sister who murders her older brother because he couldn’t keep his big butt off her lap!” I jabbed him in the hip with my finger.

Keltin laughed and stood. “All right. How do I look?”

I lifted my gaze over my book.

He wore his favorite red jacket with the orange-gold vest and gold leaves embroidered into it, and had a fresh haircut. The barber had cut the sides of his head short, keeping the length on top, and had trimmed a pattern on the right side with a razor. All in all, Keltin looked rather dashing.

I finally closed my book. “Keltin, you are handsome. Why are you so panicked?”

Turning his head to give me a better view of the leaves now adorning the side of his head, he pointed. “Not too much?”

“You’ve done it before.”

“Yes, but . . .” He chewed his bottom lip and tugged on the sleeve of his shirt to pull it down below the sleeve of his jacket. “Things are different now with everyone finding out about me and him. Not to mention, you and

I haven't spoken with each other about it either."

The "it" he referred to was the fact he had been courting the man of my dreams behind my back. The day of the summer solstice, almost three months before, Ulrich had been turned into a frog by the sea witch—who was also his mother—and Keltin had kissed him to return him to his real form. I'd always been fond of Prince Ulrich. He would invite me to spend a week with him on his ship and, of course, Keltin would tag along because Ulrich was an only child, and Keltin always felt the need to chaperone.

I had also always known of Keltin's preference toward men. That had never been a surprise to me. However, it wasn't until the night of the summer ball I discovered Keltin and Ulrich were in love, and *that* had hurt. Keltin and I had always shared things with each other.

Everything but *that*.

To bring up that night as guests were arriving for our autumn celebration was a good move on Keltin's part because, no matter the outcome of the conversation, I would be forced to interact with him all night.

I let out a sigh and set my book on the table to my left. "How do you think I feel, Keltin?"

He averted his gaze.

"I gushed over Ulrich. I even told you that I hoped he would be the one I would marry! All those times we went on carriage rides, sailed, or had picnics, you were there. Not *once* did you say anything to me about your feelings for him. I had to find out that not only did you like him, but you two were in a relationship in front of his entire kingdom!" I shook my head. "It hurt."

"I didn't plan for that to happen. How was I supposed to know the sea witch was going to turn him into a frog?"

I narrowed my eyes. "You could have told me at any point instead of allowing me to let my feelings for him grow."

Keltin shifted his weight. "You're right. I'm . . . I'm really sorry. I held it from you because Ulrich's father wasn't open to the idea of him being with men. We decided to keep it secret so he wouldn't get in trouble."

I rose to my feet and ran my hands over my dress to smooth wrinkles that weren't there. "You should go greet him."

"So . . . you're okay?"

"What do you want? My blessing?" I pursed my lips.

He shrugged his left shoulder. "Or just telling me that you forgive me."

"You have to earn that." I folded my arms across my chest and blinked.

Keltin's brows shifted from concern to frustration quickly. "You're truly going to hold this over my head?"

"Yes. Because you deserve to feel how angry I am for you keeping this from me."

"But you know now."

"Get out. Just go." I gestured with my hand toward the door. "Ulrich is probably standing outside his carriage looking like a lost puppy."

When Keltin frowned, he looked very much like our father. Keltin crossed the rug and paused with his hand on the handle of the door. "Someday you're going to regret being so cruel to others. Even if Ulrich hadn't chosen me to be with, he deserved someone better than you." He glared at me, slamming the door shut behind him before I could get over my shock and spit back a retort.

I stood, my arms limp my sides and my mouth hanging open. Keltin always had been the best at getting the last word in. Growling, I tightened my hands into fists. "You'll regret being cruel," I sassed and marched out of the library.

As the second in line for the throne, I still had to be civil to *all* of our guests, even if I was still upset with Ulrich and Keltin.

Keltin was nearing his twentieth birthday, and when he did so, he would begin running aspects of the kingdom until he was given full power when Father got too old. Our father had been training him since he was a child, pulling him into meetings with the advisors, teaching him how to sword fight, ride, hunt, everything.

I'd started those trainings. I used to hunt with Keltin and Father. Until I turned twelve and all of my training changed. Overnight, I began teachings on how to be a proper wife and right-hand of a king. My mother always said the king runs the kingdom, but the queen can control the king. I was "destined" to be someone's bride, though clearly not Ulrich's. With Elisa taking over the throne in Griswil, the only option left for me was Prince Mathias of Zelig.

I pushed my flurry of thoughts aside as I made my way through the castle. When I finally reached the landing, I let Ulrich know with a glare that I was just as upset with him as I was with Keltin.

Ulrich was holding onto Keltin's hand, chatting excitedly about all of the changes that had been done to Delphi, Terricina's capital. "We've got the palace completely repaired now, and a lot of the buildings are being fixed. Odette was right in letting the sirens help us. It turns out, the sirens are quite brilliant engineers. They've already rebuilt the docks, and we have a harbor again!"

"You've been without vital trade for months. Is that back?" Keltin replied.

Ulrich nodded. "Our country is still struggling. But we're off to a great start. Turns out the pirates are pretty helpful too. Speaking of which . . ." He looked over his shoulder. "Are you coming or not?"

"Course I am!" a familiar female voice said.

I rolled my eyes as I reached the main level. Of course Odette had come. No sooner did I reach the bottom of the staircase than Odette strolled in—carrying her own bag—with Captain James Hook behind her. I'd managed to embarrass myself when I flirted with him at the summer ball before realizing he was a *pirate* captain. I'd met her briefly at the ball and foolishly asked her to tell Ulrich I liked him.

Keltin's eyes settled on me, and he dropped Ulrich's hand.

Ulrich looked offended at first until he followed Keltin's gaze to me. "Ismae!" he shouted.

He ran over and wrapped his arms around me like he had completely forgotten everything he'd put me through. With his city being sunk into the sea and all the chaos he'd had to deal with, I supposed I should have been a little forgiving. But I wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Ulrich." I gave a polite little hug back.

He pulled back, hands on my shoulders, and scowled at me. "Keltin said you're pouting."

"I am *not* pouting," I insisted with a scowl of my own.

"I thought I was a little obvious in my relationship with Keltin," he carried on. "When we three sailed together, didn't you see me sitting on his lap while we sang shanties and drank? Or when I danced with him?"

Their gazes scrutinized me. The last thing I needed was to be judged by pirates. I shook off Ulrich's grip, my cheeks burning in embarrassment. "You still should have told me. How was I supposed to know you weren't drunk?"

He shrugged. "If you insist. I am in love with your brother, Keltin." He flashed his dashing smile and took Keltin's hand. "Now, let's have some fun before the celebration! Odette, really, servants can bring up the luggage."

"I'm also quite capable of carrying it myself."

Odette, with her fiery red hair and matching intense personality, wore an outfit similar to Ulrich's. While Ulrich wore the blue and gold jacket I'd seen on multiple occasions, Odette wore a white jacket over a blue shirt and gold vest. I was stunned to see her wearing matching trousers.

She looked like one of the men!

Odette greeted me with a silent nod of her head before she carried on right past me.

James followed behind her. He wore the same stunning red and black outfit he'd worn at the summer ball, though he actually took time to stop and give me a proper greeting. He took my hand and kissed the back. "It is good to see you again, Princess Ismae."

I smiled. "Same to you, Captain."

His dark skin looked even richer in the torchlight, and his chestnut eyes glistened. His hair was braided back—which Odette must have helped with considering he had a hook for a left hand. James straightened, grabbed his pack, and flung it back over his shoulder before carrying on after Odette.

"You're like a cat," Ulrich observed.

I raised my brow. "Pardon me?"

"Haven't you seen a cat when another comes into their territory? They bristle and get all prickly and big to ward off a potential enemy." Ulrich grinned like a fool.

I used to be head-over-heels for that grin.

Not any longer.

I let out a bottled-up breath and tilted my head. "I expected you to use some ocean-type reference. Like a sea urchin."

"Oh, Ismae." He chuckled. "Guests will be arriving all day. Why don't we sit and have tea? We can introduce Odette and James to your castle and traditions?"

"Keltin can help you with that. I'm waiting for Elisa. We didn't get to talk at the summer ball, and I want to know more about this fae she's with."

Ulrich shook his head at me. "Suit yourself." He returned to Keltin's side, muttering something about me being stubborn.

Luckily for me, Elisa wasn't too far behind in arriving. I'd just made myself comfortable in one of the chairs along the corridor when a herald scurried to me, his long mustache slick with oil to hold it into the perfect curl.

"Your Majesty." He bowed at the waist, the buttons on his shirt protesting as they threatened to pop. "Crown Princess Elisa has arrived."

"Wonderful!" I jumped to my feet, gathered my skirts into my right hand, and dashed down the hallway to the grand entrance and out the open doors.

At the spring ball earlier that year, the kingdom of Griswil was recovering from an attack. From what Elisa said in her letters, a wraith dragon—summoned by the arrogant *boy* Elisa had been engaged to—had destroyed the castle and a nearby town. She'd also accepted she was of dragon heritage and not cursed by a sorceress after all.

I hadn't had the opportunity to see Elisa as a real dragon.

A carriage sat out front, which I found amusing considering Elisa was more than capable of flying to Arington.

No sooner did I have that thought than a massive shadow blinded the sun and drew my attention to the sky. A stunning green and gold dragon landed in the courtyard, causing the ground to tremble.

I gasped.

Elisa was . . . incredible!

A young man slid to the ground from the dragon's back, and the dragon transformed into Elisa, who looked more radiant than I'd ever seen her. "Ismae!" she called, waving her hand.

I laughed. "You know how to make an entrance!" I rushed across the dirt road in front of the palace doors—careful to keep my skirts out of the dust—and across the lawn.

We embraced in a tight squeeze.

In all the years I knew Elisa, she'd been passive, squelched under her mother's thumb. Poor Elisa hadn't been allowed out of the castle much, not even allowed to correspond with me by letters. At least, not without her mother interfering.

But when I pulled back, my hands on Elisa's arms, I saw a strong, confident woman. Her blue eyes were alight with joy, her skin no longer pale from lack of sunlight, and she'd braided her hair up and around her head to keep it off her shoulders in a way I'd never seen done before. It was

likely due to Griswil's new relations with the fae in her land.

"I wanted to introduce you to Dormir," Elisa said. She stepped back and held her arm out toward the young man I'd glimpsed jumping from her back earlier.

I curtsied and he bowed. "Pleased to meet you, Dormir. I am Princess Ismae."

"I've heard so much about you." He smiled, and his lavender eyes shifted to Elisa. "I did want to meet you at the summer ball, but things are still unsettled in Griswil, which is why we didn't stay long."

Elisa nodded, and they both returned their attention to me. "I'm afraid not everyone is thrilled to have the fae returning to the land, let alone dragon kin running the kingdom. We were only able to stay long enough to say hello to everyone before leaving."

"That explains why I didn't see you after I met Ulrich's *sister*." I rolled my eyes.

Elisa leaned close. "I heard rumors she is a pirate. Is it true?"

"Yes. Can you believe it?" I added a sprinkling of disdain on my words.

"No!" Elisa gasped, excitement shining in her eyes. A new golden hue surrounded her pupils, and I wondered if it had come from her embracing her true self as a dragon.

"You're excited?" I looked her up and down.

"Ismae, a pirate! We used to pretend to be pirates with Ulrich every summer solstice, don't you remember?"

"Pretending to be one and *actually* being one are entirely different."

Elisa laughed and looped her arm through mine so we could walk back to the castle. "I was also told Ulrich was a frog."

"Yes, and Keltin kissed him, and he returned to his true self. True love wins again!" I grumbled dramatically, adding a flourish of my arm.

"Keltin and Ulrich are . . ." She rolled her eyes and looked over at Dormir. "We should have stayed that night. We missed out on all of the fun!"

Dormir chuckled politely. "It appears so."

"Dormir, tell me, do all of your people have oddly colored hair?" I asked.

He gave me a bemused grin. "To us, humans have odd hair. It's always the same four colors. Rather boring, if you ask me."

I tilted my head. Red, black, blond, and brown. I had to hand it to the fae,

he was right. Turning my attention back to Elisa, I asked, “How is your family?”

Elisa knew what I meant. “We miss Dahlia greatly, but we are healing.” She quickly changed the topic and told me all about the reconstruction of Griswil’s wooden castle with the help of the fae. They’d even used magic to help protect it from flames so it wouldn’t burn down again. I made a face when she mentioned magic had also helped them repair the damage to Handlin, the town nearest the castle, and provided wards so they could be warned against certain types of dark magic.

“You *could* outlaw magic, you know,” I said, well aware of how haughty I sounded.

“I don’t see how that would help,” Elisa stated. I could see she was trying to resist the urge to frown.

Dormir didn’t hide his frown of disapproval at all. “Has your kingdom outlawed magic?”

I nodded. “If you cast any type of spell, you could be imprisoned for a week or even banished.”

He studied me with his strange purple eyes, then turned to Elisa for confirmation.

She sighed. “I am honestly surprised your father has allowed us to come, considering magic literally runs in our veins, and we all know Ulrich will cause some sort of mischief tonight.”

I shrugged. I’d always had normal Keltin and Elisa on my side growing up. Mathias and Tavia we knew were magical from a young age, and Ulrich always gloated about his powers whenever we were near. But magic was never an issue because they were royalty.

“How long has it been outlawed?” Dormir asked.

“Magic has always been . . . monitored,” I said. “Strictly. It’s only been outlawed entirely the last year or so.”

We reached the wing with the guest bedrooms, and I directed them to the two bedrooms they’d been assigned. “There was an attack on our western towns from creatures of the Weeping Woods. The magical creatures destroyed the town of Cornesh, killed many of its people, and reminded us just how dangerous magic and magical creatures are.”

Dormir shook his head. “That’s rather unfortunate.”

“Indeed.”

“That you would punish innocent people for the actions of a few,” Dormir finished.

I opened the first door. Dormir didn’t know of what he spoke, so I elected to ignore him. “This is your room, Elisa.”

She walked in and smiled at the sunlight spilling through four tall, thin windows. “I love how different our castles are.”

While Elisa’s castle was built out of wood and embraced nature, Arington’s castle was carved out of dark-gray granite with stunning glittering particles in it. We had statues paying homage to our ancestors, scenes from significant events carved into the wooden doors, and the kingdom’s coat of arms displayed above each exterior doorway. Where Griswil’s castle had wooden shutters to cover their simple windows, we had tall windows of stained glass. They weren’t nearly as elegant or well-designed as the castle in Zelig, but ours held color and broke up the monotony of stone.

“The men will be sleeping on the opposite side of the hallway,” I explained as I turned to Dormir, who stood in the doorway of Elisa’s room.

His purple eyes quickly shifted to me, and he straightened. “Of course. And I wouldn’t mind a tour of your home if you have time.”

“I want to meet Ulrich’s sister,” Elisa added, dropping the small pack she’d been carrying onto the bed.

After showing Dormir his room and giving him time to leave his bags, we went down to the gardens where Ulrich was standing on top of a stone bench telling the elaborate tale of how he had been transformed into a siren and it was up to him to single-handedly take care of his people. Even I sat to hear him tell how Odette arrived in the nick of time, how they traveled to Zelig to get help from Mathias—who “was barely helpful at all”—and how James now had a crew that included fairies.

For a moment, everything was as it should have been. A group of my dearest friends gathered together to celebrate the coming of the autumn harvest, to show how the four kingdoms were aligned together as one.

I had no idea how quickly things would change.



TWO

I SPENT THE NEXT DAY GIVING ODETTE, JAMES, AND DORMIR A by Ulrich, Keltin, and Elisa. We ate a massive lunch with all royalty present, including Tavia and Mathias who arrived halfway through. They both looked exhausted, and they didn't have their mother with them. She'd been ill for a few weeks, though I suspected longer considering they weren't at the summer ball.

Positively horrible!

We princesses gathered together in my room to have our hair done. Keltin had insisted I not leave Odette out, and I begrudgingly relented and personally invited her. She'd exchanged a wary look with James, who only shrugged and nudged her to join us.

Elisa and Tavia were already seated, but Odette peered down the row of four mirrors positioned in front of the chairs. Her gaze found Tavia, and Odette slowly raised her eyebrows with a knowing expression, though she said nothing as she took her seat.

I took my position between Tavia and Elisa, then extended a hand to Tavia, which she grabbed. "I'm so glad you made it. I was worried you wouldn't make it in time."

"Yes, the snow has been horrible the past several weeks, making the mountain pass impossible to get through." She held a pin up to the servant assisting with her elegant black hair.

"Flying would have been as treacherous," Elisa added.

Tavia nodded. "Add mother being ill . . ." She looked through her mirror to Odette. "Did you travel well?"

Odette turned her head to return the gaze instead of using the mirror. The servant combing through her nest of wild red hair grabbed her head and turned it forward again. Odette rolled her eyes. "Yes, the journey was quite all right. It's peculiar being this far inland. Zelig was the first time I'd traveled away from the sea for any length of time, but making a journey of this has been . . . I don't quite know how to put it."

"An ache in your chest that makes you want to vomit?" Tavia answered.

"Exactly." She nodded, again making the servant stop her from moving.

"Were you raised on the sea?" Elisa asked. "I'm afraid we didn't stay

long at the summer celebration and I didn't get an opportunity to properly meet you, aside from our brief greeting."

"Ah. You're the dragon, right?" Odette asked.

Elisa smiled. "Guilty. And you're a siren."

"Indeed." Odette smiled back.

I rolled my eyes. I was the only "normal" girl in the room. The only one who didn't have any special abilities. I'd once had Elisa until she realized being a dragon wasn't a curse at all but her heritage. A pang of jealousy burned through me. Even Odette was some sort of magical being.

"Tell me more about being a pirate!" Elisa pleaded.

"There's nothing exciting about being a pirate," Tavia cut in. "Besides, I'm positive Ulrich's already told you the tale of Delphi three times by now."

"But I haven't gotten Odette's perspective," Elisa countered. "Not to mention the rumors I've heard."

Odette chuckled. "You must mean the rumor my mother is the sea witch?"

Elisa grinned and nodded.

"It's true, I'm afraid. And to make matters worse, I turned her into a fish, and she's stuck in a cage in the palace."

Elisa's hands flew to her mouth with a gasp before she burst into giggles. "That's horrible. I shouldn't laugh!"

Odette joined her. "Laugh all you want. It's amusing now. We're still working on getting the sirens comfortable being on land. It's proving more difficult than we thought, but we wanted things established before I tried to bring my mother back from the spell. Though, without the summer stone, I have my own doubts that we will be able to bring her back."

Elisa gasped and turned in her chair. "The summer stone is gone? So is the spring stone! I must ask, did you meet a boy named Gerard?"

"You know him?" Odette asked, eyes wide.

She nodded furiously. "We were temporarily engaged until he attacked my kingdom."

"Really? He was very quiet."

The two carried on while I leaned to Tavia. "Do you trust her?" I asked in a quieter tone, inclining my head slightly to indicate the pirate sitting nearby.

Tavia smiled softly, her beautiful red lips vibrant against her pale face. “Yes.”

“What is she like?”

“She tries hard to be polite, but she wasn’t raised under the rules of royalty. As you can imagine, she steps on tradition. She’s also rather impulsive. Because of that, she may offend you. Quite frankly, I don’t see you two getting along if you fail to remember that. But she has a good heart.”

“Do you like her?” I pressed.

Tavia glanced at Odette again.

The servant had managed to tame Odette’s hair and had twisted it with a golden ribbon around her head like a crown itself. Somehow it all fit. Odette was turning her head side-to-side to get a proper look.

“I do,” Tavia finally stated. “Give her a chance.”

“If you’re willing to trust her, I can try,” I decided.

With our hair done and cheeks rouged, we took turns putting on our dresses and gushing at how each of us looked. My new gown was made of gorgeous blood-red fabric with glittering gold jewels that reflected the torchlight whenever I moved.

My handmaid finished securing a ruby necklace around my neck and stepped back, allowing me to turn and have one final glance at myself in the full-length mirror.

“You are beautiful, Your Highness,” she confirmed.

Smiling, I ran my hand down the front of my gown, feeling the soft fabric and bumps from the jewels. “I know. It’s perfect.” I turned to assess the others.

Odette wore a deep-emerald-green dress with gold accents, making her eyes pop. Surprisingly, she actually *looked* like a princess with no signs of her pirate heritage.

Elisa wore a fabulous flowing dress with oranges, reds, and yellows of different shades, something she wouldn’t have worn a year ago.

Finally, Tavia wore a long orange dress, rather simple in design, but one that accented every curve of her body. Though Tavia was only a year older than me, she stood taller than all of us, without the help of heels. I’d always envied her lean figure, though I’d never dare tell her.

“Happy autumn equinox.” I grinned and walked to the door.

My servant opened the door and bowed as she stepped back.

The men stood outside in the hallway. James stepped forward, his smile radiant as he held his hand out to accept Odette's. The love written all over his face made me bite my tongue. I'd always longed for someone to give me that kind of look, but not even Ulrich would look at me that way now.

Dormir beamed when Elisa stepped out. His lavender eyes ignited with the same adoring look, and he walked forward to take Elisa's hand. He wore a golden suit clearly of fae design and material, and it somehow complemented Elisa's colorful dress perfectly.

All of this love made me want to roll my eyes.

Keltin and Ulrich stood side-by-side, with Ulrich casually leaning against the wall and fussing with the cufflinks to his shirt. Whether he realized he was doing it, I wasn't sure.

Mathias was dressed in a black suit, but with an orange vest and tie to match Tavia, and he stepped forward to take his sister's hand. Or so I assumed. Instead, he stopped in front of me and extended his hand to me. "Princess Ismae."

"Mathias," I answered, sizing him up with a careful look.

"May I escort you down to the ball?"

"Keltin usually esc—" My words disappeared when I turned to see Keltin take Ulrich's hand and put it in the crook of his elbow.

Ulrich silently shook his head and pulled away, whispering something I couldn't hear.

I dragged my gaze away and looked up at Mathias. "What about Tavia? Who will escort her?"

"She would rather I didn't." He gave me that sly smile of his, the one that reached his eyes only enough to make them sparkle without actually answering anything.

I let out a loud enough sigh to let him know I wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea, but I needed to be polite especially since we were the hosts and he the guest. "You're not going to try and propose again, are you?" I asked, raising a brow at him as I accepted his hand.

Mathias appeared genuinely offended. "If I did, why shouldn't I? It makes sense partnering our kingdoms. Your family and mine get along. Keltin and I are good friends. Need I continue?"

"Because I'm not ready to be married off, especially to someone I have

no feelings for,” I said possibly a tad too sharply.

He stopped, stopping me with him, and Elisa and Dormir stepped around us.

Elisa cast me a look, silently asking if she needed to run any interference, but I waved her along subtly with my fingers.

I turned to face Mathias. “Why do I have to keep reminding you I have no feelings for you?”

“You had feelings for Ulrich, and look how that turned out,” Mathias shot back.

I glared and pulled my hand away from him. “Well. Then maybe I don’t need a man in my life at all.” I spun on my heel, defiance sparking in my veins. “I don’t need a man in my life at all. I will be fine on my own, even if I have to be the queen of my own kingdom and rule it alone.” I heard Mathias mumble something in his native tongue before I rounded the corner and headed down the stairs, holding my skirts up as I did so.

Before I even reached the landing, Keltin loudly whispered, “Watch out. Mathias has offended Ismae yet again.”

“She’s always easily offended,” Ulrich muttered back.

I wished we weren’t in our gowns or at the ball so I could throw a rock at him, but we were no longer children and we weren’t alone. No one would approve if I threw a punch either. Instead, I glowered at him.

Elisa cleared her throat. “Ismae, I was wondering if you had any acorns collected? I would love to bring them home for Marigold. She’s taken up Dahlia’s passion for painting them.”

It wasn’t exactly how *I* would try and change the subject. Her words stung. Dahlia had been killed that spring by the monster Elisa had been forced to be engaged to. Or rather, by a monster he had summoned. Regardless, he was responsible, and I vowed if I ever saw him again, I’d find a sword and run it through his chest myself.

“Yes, I have,” I answered. “I’ve got a box of them for you.” I plastered a smile on my face.

My father approached us just then with my mother at his side. “The guests are all here and waiting in the ballroom. We shall do the traditional introductions and begin the celebration.” He turned and looked at me, smiling so big small wrinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes.

I always felt like a little girl whenever my father looked at me like that,

and I was immediately pulled to my childhood when I was five and stood on his feet while he walked me down the stairs to the ballroom, or while we danced and Keltin played his violin.

Mother wore a gorgeous golden gown, simple and straight, but with an incredible orange-jeweled necklace. She smiled at me with just as much pride as my father. “You’re all growing up so much. It’s hard to imagine that in just a few years each of you will be taking on more responsibility and eventually running your kingdoms.”

“We don’t have time to gush over how grown up they are,” Father reminded. He chuckled and then guided my mother toward the ballroom. “Come along!”

“The king and queen of Arington! Crown Prince Keltin Malik Pandhurs with Prince Ulrich followed by Princess Ismae Pandhurs.”

We entered the ballroom in that order, followed by Elisa and Dormir of Griswil, Mathias and Tavia of Zelig, and Odette and James of Terricina. All royalty under one roof for the autumn equinox celebration.

Once introductions were completed, my father stood at the front of the room. He held out his arms, quieting the cheers of the crowd. “Welcome everyone, yet again, to another autumn celebration. I am pleased to see so many familiar faces, and some new.” He nodded to some noblemen and women I hadn’t been introduced to and wondered if they were part of the group from Terricina. “Who wants to listen to me talk all night? Let us begin the celebration! Music!” He waved to the orchestra, which began to play, its music rising above the excited chatter of the crowd.

I was about to walk away, but he cleared his throat.

“Father?” I asked as I paused and turned toward him.

“You and I get the first dance.” He held out his hand again.

“You always do the first dance with Mother.” I gave her a confused look.

She laughed. “Go dance with your father. I’m going to speak with Queen Rachel.” She walked away, leaving me slightly confused.

Of course I couldn’t say no and stepped up to dance with my father. “What’s on your mind?” I asked curiously.

“Does something have to be on my mind to dance with my daughter?”

I raised my eyebrow. For as many years as I could remember, my father *always* took the first dance with my mother.

Father read my expression and let out a quiet sigh. He directed me onto

the floor amongst lords, ladies, and my friends who were already dancing. He put his hands in position and began guiding me through the steps of the dance. “Your mother and I have been speaking. With Keltin and Ulrich being together, and Keltin taking on more responsibilities—”

I stopped mid-step, pulling him to a stop with me. My tongue tingled, and my palms instantly got damp. “You talked about my future without me being part of the conversation?”

“I was merely informing you that it is time to think of your future.” He shrugged. “I imagine there will be a lot of discussions about combining the kingdoms, should Ulrich and Keltin remain together, or perhaps they would move to one or the other and—”

“Odette is the crown princess now, in case you forgot,” I cut in with a sharp tone. “She’ll rule Terricina, so *if* Ulrich and Keltin”—bile burned my tongue—“get married, Ulrich would live here. I fail to see what any of this has to do with me.”

“Zelig is an ally to us.”

I dropped my hands and took a quick step backward, bumping into a couple as they tried to pass. This caused the man to step on the woman’s dress. She stumbled and fell.

I clenched my jaw and looked back at my father. “I will not marry Mathias merely because *you* want me to.”

“Ismae, I think—”

I turned on my heel and stormed away. Who did he think he was, pawning me off to Mathias? I’d never felt so insulted! For the past five years, being someone else’s wife was all I’d been trained to be. But it couldn’t possibly be *all* I was good for.



THREE

EVENTUALLY I FOUND TAVIA STANDING BESIDE OTHER YOUNG were waiting their turn to be asked for a dance. They all kept a safe distance from Tavia, and she didn't seem to mind.

"Keltin is trying too hard," she pointed out without casting me so much as a glance as I stepped up to her side.

I followed her gaze to Keltin and Ulrich, who seemed to be in a quiet argument. Keltin was gesturing toward the dance floor, while Ulrich was shaking his head, his brows pinched.

"I've never known Ulrich to be one to stand down from having all attention drawn to him," I stated.

"This is also the first time both parties have publicly shown they are in a relationship," she reminded me. She finally directed her gaze to me. "I believe Mathias is trying too hard with you too. He means well. He is overwhelmed trying to satisfy your father's desires while ensuring our own kingdom is safe."

I twitched my brow and looked over at her flirtatious twin, who was kissing the hand of a noble girl I only knew by the name of Natalia. He guided her onto the floor but cast a look in my direction and smiled when he spotted me watching. I quickly looked away and rounded my shoulders. "I'm sure he is fine."

"He's always adored you, Ismae." Tavia's stoic expression softened. "And to be honest, I wouldn't mind having you for a sister." A smile brightened her face.

"He's . . . not all that bad," I admitted. I sighed and picked at my thumbnail. "It's just everyone is deciding *for* me. I have no choice. Is your mother pressuring you to be wed?"

"I'm afraid not. It isn't important right now." She took a deep breath and let out a heavy sigh. She gestured to the crowd. "Besides, who do I have to marry?"

"Who do you have your eyes on?" I grinned. "Perhaps Lord Towdin?"

She gasped and put her hand to her lips. "Ismae, that old man?"

We burst into giggles.

"Perhaps one of the men from the north?" I twitched my eyebrows.

“A barbarian? Please.” She rolled her eyes dramatically. “They keep to themselves for a reason.”

I shrugged. “They can’t possibly all be pillagers.”

Tavia raised her eyebrows. “This is coming from you? You won’t even walk through your own villages without an escort.”

I tilted my head toward her. “Tavia.”

“Oh, you were being sarcastic.” She chuckled and returned her attention to the ball. “Mathias is trying to make you jealous by dancing with those who consider you a friend.”

I looked at the girl he danced with. She was one of a small handful of noble women I was forced to associate with, but I didn’t consider any of them friends, not like Elisa and Tavia.

Mathias glanced in my direction, confirming Tavia’s theory.

“It’s not working,” I said. A handsome young man approached me, and I tensed. He was clearly trying to impress the ladies by attempting to grow a goatee, but it looked so pathetic I wasn’t sure he was old enough to grow a proper one.

“Pardon my interruption, ladies.” He bowed and turned his attention to me. “May I have this dance, Your Highness?”

I wanted to refuse, but Tavia nudged me. I accepted his hand and allowed him to guide me onto the floor,

“I am Lord Burdon Dovan,” the young man announced, stiffly putting his arm at my waist and taking my opposite hand.

“Pleased to meet you. And where are you from, Lord Dovan?”

“Terricina,” he said shortly.

I expected the conversation to continue, but he stepped, pushing me backward, and then swung awkwardly to the side. I cleared my throat. “What are you the lord over?”

“You don’t know?” His eyes widened, and his mouth opened in clear surprise. “My family owns the best vineyards in Terricina!”

“So you must be a Vadier?”

He frowned and stepped awkwardly, almost causing me to trip and fall over his foot. “No. We are the Dovan Redvine Vineyard, and I am Burdon Dovan, the third son of Lord Christoff Dovan. Our wine is far better than the Vadiers’. I’m more educated as well.”

I hated how men threw around their heritage like it was supposed to

impress me. Even though I wasn't from Terricina, Prince Ulrich would often send wine from the Vadier Vineyard, and I could definitely say it was the best wine I had ever tasted, so Burdon's claims didn't impress me either.

Grateful when the song finally ended, I curtsied. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"You as well, Your Highness." He reached out his hand, and I knew he was going to plant a kiss on the back. Wishing I could refuse, but knowing I couldn't, I allowed him to show his gratitude before he bowed and walked away, hopefully to find some other maiden to dance with.

"You're supposed to be pleasant," Tavia smirked as I returned to her side.

I accepted the square cloth she offered and wiped Burdon's kiss off with it. "Was it that obvious?"

"Well, the poor boy can barely even dance," she whispered behind her hand.

"All of this dancing is making it warm in here. I need some air," I muttered.

I walked out the side door and then took the empty hallway around the front of the castle. As I began past the main doors of the castle, I spotted an old man entering. His clothes were ragged, his cloak torn. It was more than evident this man was *not* royalty or nobility. He was barely a peasant.

"Excuse me!" I called loudly, hinting to the useless guards. "You aren't allowed in the castle." I marched over and blocked the path of the old man. "You should be down in the town's square, celebrating with the other *peasants*."

He slowly lifted his green eyes to mine and studied me with a look so cold it stole my breath.

I recovered quickly and leaned forward. Louder, I said, "Did you hear me? You aren't allowed in here."

"You must be the princess of Arington," he replied in a forced voice.

I rolled my eyes and pointed to my crown. "Does this piece of jewelry give it away? No one wants you here. Peasants need to be down in their own celebrations *away* from the castle."

His eyes moved down and then back up.

The poor old man probably couldn't comprehend my words!

The guards finally made their way over, but neither of them appeared too concerned. "Come on, old man, we will get you back outside."

The old man held up one gnarled finger toward them in a silent gesture. He then gripped his frayed red cloak, pulled it open, and reached inside. From some inner pocket, he produced a stunning red rose and held it out to me. "This is a gift for you, milady. Do not be deceived by looks alone, or the truth of your heart will be shone. Everyone you meet is worth something to someone."

I tried my hardest not to sneer as I took the rose from him. As my fingers wrapped around the vibrant green stem, my thumb pricked on one of the thorns. "Ouch!" I exclaimed, dropping the rose. I stuck my thumb in my mouth and sucked on the droplet of blood forming on my skin.

"Foolish old man," I muttered and kicked the rose. It skidded across the floor and struck the wall. I turned on my heel and returned to the celebration.

The moment I entered the ballroom, Elisa skipped over to me giggling like she had finished off an entire bottle of wine by herself. She looped our arms together. "Where did you disappear to?"

I scrutinized her flushed face. I couldn't help but frown. "Elisa, are you all right? You're all flushed."

She waved her hand dismissively. "I've been dancing all night. Nothing more." She let go of my arm, only to grab both of my hands and swoop me in a circle, barely avoiding the people nearby. "We should go find Prince Ulrich. I've been wanting to dance with him all night." She snatched a glass of champagne off the tray as a servant walked by.

I plucked it from her hand. "Have you been drinking all night too?"

Elisa pouted but quickly giggled again. "No. But I do believe I may have to explain myself to Dormir." She touched her lips, and the wheels in my head began to turn. "I kissed him in front of everyone."

"Did you happen to do something with Ulrich earlier?" I asked. I began looking through the crowd and, as I suspected, spotted Ulrich doubled over with laughter.

Mathias patted him on the back as he laughed until he made eye contact with me, stopped laughing, and jabbed Ulrich in the ribs with his finger. I saw him mouth my name, and Ulrich straightened immediately. He couldn't get the grin off his face, however, as he waved to me.

"Oh, you found him!" Elisa pulled my arm. She stopped suddenly when Dormir stepped between to people. "Dormir!"

He stood awkwardly, holding out glasses of water in his hands, while Elisa threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

He threw me a confused look.

I knew Ulrich. I'd been in love with him my entire life. I knew what he was capable of, and I knew he couldn't help it if he had the urge to be mischievous.

I grabbed Elisa and pulled her off of Dormir. "Go wipe off your lips."

"But—"

I grabbed her shoulders and forced her to face me. "You never act like this. You're always the most reserved of us. Ulrich has done something to bewitch you."

"Bewitch?" Elisa burst into giggles. "Certainly not. It's just something to make me happy and help me relax. I offered to try it."

I rolled my eyes and turned her to Dormir. "You need to get her to wipe off her lips and give her that water to drink. I'm positive Ulrich did something. He usually does. I'm going to speak with him."

Dormir threw a scowl in Ulrich's direction. "I thought your country doesn't allow magic."

"We don't," I muttered.

"Here comes the mama wolf," Mathias grinned.

They snickered.

I put my hands on my hips and glared at Ulrich.

"Princess Ismae. I was going to ask you to dance earlier, but now is as good a time as any." He bowed.

"Where is Keltin, and why isn't he keeping you in check?"

Ulrich frowned, suddenly becoming serious. "We had a minor disagreement." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "He wanted to dance all night, but I don't think our countries are quite ready for that."

I relaxed my stance. "Ulrich, you know magic isn't allowed in Arington. It's against our laws. If Father finds out, he will have no choice than to put you in prison the rest of the night."

He put his hands up. "To be honest, it wasn't a spell at all."

I raised my eyebrow, not believing him for even a moment.

He stepped closer to me and pulled a small vial from his pocket to show me. "See? It's something I invented myself. I don't have a name for it yet,

but Elisa thought it sounded fun and thought she would try it for me. You put it on your lips, and it makes you euphoric. Happy. Like there isn't a care in the world!"

"Maybe you should try some," Mathias smirked.

"Is that how you got Keltin to fall in love with you?"

Ulrich visibly flinched and lowered my hand. He lifted his gaze, but all light was gone. "Ismae, this was merely a joke. How I feel for Keltin is real."

"And yet Keltin is nowhere to be seen." I put my hands out and looked side to side. "Did you play with his heart too and leave when you broke it?"

"Ismae," Mathias cut in. "You don't need to be so harsh on Ulrich. You know he jokes. It happens every seasonal celebration." He put his hand on Ulrich's shoulder.

I straightened and folded my arms. "Regardless, you should know better than to fool around with someone's heart."

"Perhaps the two of you should talk while you dance," Mathias suggested, giving Ulrich a little nudge.

Ulrich cleared his throat and bowed to me, as a gentleman should. "Might I have this dance?"

"I suppose," I relented.

We were both silent as the song began, and although we fell into the routine of the dance, I could feel Ulrich's tension in his shoulders.

"How long have you two been together?" I finally asked, wanting nothing more than to breathe the silence.

"Over a year." He shrugged a shoulder, making my hand bounce. "He confessed to me last summer when we were sailing to the southern isles."

My heart broke. That was the same voyage I'd written in my journal and admitted to myself I would seek Ulrich's hand in marriage. I would have been honored to be his wife. He was fun, light, always smiling.

"Ismae." He stopped dancing. His careless air was gone, and he touched my chin. "I didn't know you had such feelings for me. Please know I never meant to hurt you. I never saw you had feelings for me."

I stepped back, wiping my hands on my dress. "I need a word with my father."

"You aren't going to tell him about the magic." He turned as I walked around him and reached out for me, but I pulled away. He quickly followed.

“Ismae. Telling your father about this isn’t going to stop what I’ve done. I mean, come on. I’ve always done a little trick at the celebrations. Just because I don’t have feelings for you doesn’t mean you should throw me in prison. Ismae, it was harmless magic, I wasn’t going to let Elisa embarrass herself beyond what she was doing.”

“You don’t get it, do you, Ulrich?” I snapped. “You were forcing her against her will to act out, to be a flirtatious floozy! *You* took that free will away from her with your magic. Maybe a night in prison will help me feel better about everything.” I turned on my heel.

He finally grabbed my arm and stopped me. “Ismae, we are friends. I can’t believe you would throw me in prison just because I don’t have feelings for you. I wasn’t taking away her free will, I just . . . encouraged her to act out her deep desires.”

“I fail to see how that is any different. If you don’t release me, I will call for the guards and you will spend much longer than the night in the prison.”

Ulrich’s jaw tightened and he lowered his hand.

“Hmph.” I stuck my chin up in the air and walked up the steps to my father’s throne.

“Ismae! Isn’t this celebration wonderful?” Father beamed at me, his foot tapping in beat to the music. He had a rosy color to his cheeks letting me know he had been dancing most of the night and indulged in the wine.

“I came to inform you Ulrich used magic to make Elisa become rather silly,” I said bluntly. I could feel Ulrich’s eyes on me but refused to acknowledge him. “She was dancing around and giggling like a drunk fool.”

My father’s smile fell, and he looked past me at Ulrich, then back. He cleared his throat and sat up a little prouder but spoke with a low voice. “Ismae, darling, we can speak of this in the morning when guests aren’t here.”

“Or I could cut the music and announce it to the entire room.” I folded my arms.

Mother got to her feet. “I know you are hurting, but we all know how Ulrich can be.” She gave Ulrich a polite smile.

I braved a glance at Ulrich. He didn’t return her smile. I’d never seen him so sullen. His eyes darted from my father to my mother and back, clearly nervous.

“I don’t think it necessary to punish him,” Mother finished.

“Were he one of the other noblemen, would you throw him in prison?” I gestured to the crowd. “Why do you even have this law if you won’t enforce it?”

Father cleared his throat again. “To keep our people safe, of course.”

“And if Ulrich had his way, would Elisa have been safe tonight?”

“Ismae, I don’t have feelings for her. I have feelings for Keltin,” Ulrich tried.

“And how do we know you didn’t use that same magic to make Keltin fall for you?” I turning on him. “How do we know he truly loves you? I demand Ulrich is put in prison for the rest of the night. He can return for breakfast tomorrow morning.” I turned once more at my father. “It is our law.”

Father set his goblet on the arm of his chair and stood. “I’m sorry, Ulrich, but she is correct.”

“Your Majesty, you know I would never do something as dishonorable as forcing someone to fall in love with me,” Ulrich tried.

“Do we?” I barked. “Your sister is a pirate. Pirates are full of dishonor.”

Ulrich’s eyes were full of so much pain when they looked at me, I actually lowered my hands from my hips. I could feel the sting of that look in my heart.

“If I am to spend the rest of the night in the prison, will you please pass a message on to Keltin telling him so? I don’t want him to worry when I don’t return to my chambers this evening. I don’t want him to think I left due to our disagreement.” He looked at the king. “Shall I take myself there?”

Father shook his head and put his hand on Ulrich’s back. He guided him from the throne and out one of the side doors, speaking to him in a voice low enough I couldn’t hear over the music.

I smirked and turned, only to see my mother giving me a disappointed frown.

“I knew you were bitter toward Keltin and Ulrich, but I never in all my days thought I would see you stoop this low, Ismae.” Her words cut through me. “I didn’t raise you to be bitter and vindictive. I raised you to be a princess and future queen. You can’t send all of your enemies to prison over petty things.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” I insisted.

“I think you should go to your room for the rest of the evening.” She gestured to the door opposite the one Father had taken Ulrich.

My stomach, however, dropped. “It isn’t even midnight.”

“Now, Ismae. If Ulrich is forced to be in prison tonight, you don’t deserve to be at the ball either.”

“I’m no longer a child!”

“As long as you are my daughter, you will remain my child, and you will listen to your queen and mother.”

Clenching my hands into fists, I dug my nails into my palms until the pressure made my thumb throb again. As I stormed away from the ballroom, I looked down at my pulsing thumb to see blood seeping between my fingers, then jammed my thumb in my mouth, hoping to subdue the pain.

To think my following the law would lead to me being grounded at seventeen!



FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE TO SILENCE.

I peeled an eye open. The day was brightening behind the curtains. Evidentially it was past dawn. Why hadn't my handmaid come to wake me and get me dressed? Surely Mother hadn't ordered her to make me stay in my room today as well.

I huffed and stretched, groaned, and finally climbed out of my bed.

Something was . . . wrong with my body. As I had climbed out of my bed, my natural position should have been on two legs. Yet I found myself slumped over as if I were a child on hands and knees. Even when I tried to straighten, I failed. I walked to the curtains and reached out to open them, only to freeze when I saw my hand was not a hand at all, but a wolf's paw.

I screamed and ran to the mirror standing in the corner of my bedroom. In the dim light, a massive dark-brown wolf stared back. I had seen wolves in the wild a handful of times, and I was far larger than any I'd seen, easily reaching a full-grown man's ribs and possibly even shoulders. Even worse, two short horns protruded from my forehead, one above each eye, and they curled like a corkscrew as they angled back.

Frightened yellow eyes gazed back at me.

Wolf's eyes.

"No. No, this is impossible!" I turned in a circle, assessing my body with my own eyes. I had a tail. I had paws. I was covered in fur.

I was a beast.

A horrible, disgusting beast.

Frantic, I bounded to the door and fumbled with the knob. With wolf paws, no matter how massive they were, I wasn't able to get the doorknob to turn. Frustrated, I jumped and struck the door with all four paws. The wood cracked. Again, I hit the door, and again the wood snapped and crunched. Over and over I jumped against the door until *finally* it broke open.

I landed with a grunt in the hallway.

Certainly, someone should have heard me! Why had no one come to my aid? Why had no guard run to make sure I was safe? Why . . .

I froze.

To my left was Elisa's room. Her door was open, and as I drew nearer, I found what appeared to be a stone carving of a dragon standing in the doorway with a small, very much alive tree growing in front of it.

My brows met in confusion. How could a tree take root on the floor?

"Elisa!" I shouted into her room, but the voice of a wolf's howl echoed back to me. I ran in and searched, but nothing moved. Elisa wasn't in there.

I ran to Keltin's room, but his room was empty as well.

In fact, each room I searched in the castle was empty, save some sort of unusual trinket, statue, or piece of furniture that didn't seem to belong. When I ran down to the ballroom, I halted in the doorway.

Instruments sat on the chairs where the performers had been seated the night before with a second instrument resting on the floor. A mop, duster, tray of drinks, footstool, and even a wardrobe were among some of the unusual things standing frozen in the ballroom.

Even though I saw it with my own eyes, it was hard to fathom this had happened to my home. There was only one conclusion I could come to.

Magic.

Ulrich must have used his magic to exact revenge on me for having him put in prison. It must have gotten the better of him to impact everyone in the castle and not just me. I needed to get to the prison and beg his forgiveness and ask him to return everything back to the way it was. Even if I didn't feel it was my fault at all. He could then reverse whatever vengeful "prankster" magic he had used and restore my family, friends, and guests to their rightful form.

The prison wasn't too far away from the castle, I only had to walk down the street.

Unfortunately, arriving on a horse in a flowing gown to offer my apologies wasn't going to happen. I highly doubted the guards would even know I was their princess, so I needed to exercise caution.

The front doors were much easier to open because they had handles, not turning knobs. I got them open and stepped out into the brisk morning air. Frost clung to the blades of grass in the courtyard that were still in shadow—the promise of a winter that never came to Arington.

The ominous silence in the courtyard made the hair on my neck stand. The *fur* on my neck. The soldiers should have been changing from those who stood guard at night to those who worked during the day. I should have

heard their mundane chatter. I never paid attention to their conversations because, as the princess, why should I? Yet, at that moment, I longed to hear some sort of noise letting me know not everyone had been turned into an object.

I licked my lips nervously. My chest squeezed tightly against my lungs. I tried desperately to keep my breathing even, but the longer I was awake the more I realized I wasn't having a nightmare.

This was real.

Something had happened at the castle, and I seemed to be the only one who could fix it.

I took a deep breath of confidence and trotted out.

Once through the courtyard gates, I entered the town of Avare, a sleepy village of wooden buildings lined with shops. The families who owned those shops lived above them. Already, smoke from breakfast fires puffed into the already warming air, and a few shutters opened above me.

I hadn't anticipated—though I very well should have—the woman in the window above me would let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“A wolf! A wolf in the city!”

I sprinted down the road, covering a lot of ground with each stride. But I didn't escape the danger even as I turned down the next street on which the prison sat. A man with a horse and cart gave a startled noise, and his horse reared with a shrill whinny before going into a frenzy bucking and trying to get away.

Luckily, that was enough of a distraction for the man he couldn't call for help right away. But the ruckus made me dart down a tight space between two of the buildings and into the tiny alley behind. At least there I was granted some privacy until I reached the prison.

The castle, of course, had a dungeon, but it was never used. Mother despised the idea of keeping prisoners “in the castle where her children slept.” At least, that was the argument I'd heard her pose to Father when I was a child. To satisfy her, he'd ordered a prison to be built in town. I'd only seen the squat building made of stone from a distance when passing down the main streets of Avare.

My ribs squeezed tightly again, stealing my breath. I hadn't looked for my parents. I'd been in such a panic I hadn't even gone to their bedroom. I would see them first when I got back with Ulrich.

The real trick would be getting into the prison to see him before one of the guards tried to catch and kill me. From what I could see of the outside, there were four windows on the right-side wall facing the buildings, and I imagined the same on the other facing the forest. The back wall had one heavy-looking wooden door with a slit near the top.

Maybe I didn't need to get in at all. I just needed to peer through the windows.

Proud of my idea, I immediately hurried to the first window, propped my feet up on the wall, and looked through the bars. At least Ulrich had turned me into a massive wolf and not a regular-sized one, or else I wouldn't have been able to see inside.

The first cell I checked was empty, the second had a sleeping man who reeked of drunkenness, and the third appeared empty as well. I checked the fourth and saw a young man sitting on the edge of his bed, head down.

Ulrich.

He still wore his white shirt, though he'd taken his nice dress vest and jacket off and folded them at the foot of the bed.

Guilt sat heavily on my heart.

In spite of how jealous I was that Ulrich was in love with my brother and not me, he was a friend I'd known my entire life. And I'd had him thrown in prison for the night for something petty, something completely harmless, and something I knew—and everyone else knew—Ulrich often did.

Seeing him sitting in a prison cell looking so forlorn made me realize I was definitely at fault, and he deserved my apology even if he had turned me into a beast to get it. Of course, I couldn't let him know how bad I truly felt or he might get the idea I was okay with everything.

I took a breath and let out a soft bark.

Ulrich's gaze snapped to me, and his eyes slowly widened.

"Oh, stop pretending! You know it's me. And whatever spell you did impacted the entire castle. I need you to tell the guards so you can come back with me." My ears heard that I was barking, but I had hoped Ulrich would have been able to understand my voice.

He blinked. Cautiously, he got to his feet, and his throat bobbed. He slid one foot back, and then another until his back touched the iron bars behind him. "Luis?" he called carefully, not moving his gaze from me.

"Yes?" an unseen voice replied.

“Are you hearing this?”

“Huh? You mean the dog?”

“Not a dog.” Ulrich reached his hand through the bars and waved toward the man. “You need to come see this.”

A chair scraped on the stone floor, and I rolled my eyes. “Ulrich, this isn’t funny anymore! Look, I’m sorry for making them put you here all night. Will you please come back with me and remove the spell?”

The guard, James, appeared. He wore the royal colors and symbols on his pristine red uniform. His eyes widened just like Ulrich’s. “What is this sorcery?”

“I don’t know, but I have a really bad feeling,” Ulrich replied softly.

The two stood, awkwardly staring at me.

“Why?” James asked.

“What wolf has horns?” Ulrich finally moved his gaze from me to the soldier, raising his brow as he did so.

They couldn’t understand. I was only barking to them. But Ulrich should have known! He was the one who cast this spell on me!

“You think it might be from the woods.” Realization—though false—dawned on the man’s face.

“A wolf! Get an archer!” a guard shouted to my left.

I tore my gaze away to see two guards standing at the back end of the building, one of them drew his sword, and the other was shouting orders.

I looked at Ulrich desperately. “You idiot, it’s me!”

“It seems pretty interested in you,” James pointed out.

Ulrich’s brows met. “I can’t possibly understand why. But Keltin would know more about the goings-on in his kingdom. I need to get to the castle and speak with him.”

I couldn’t stay any longer. The guards had called for an archer, and I didn’t have any experience in this body to figure out how to fight, but I knew an arrow could kill me.

I fell back down on all fours and ran for home as fast as I was able.

But the alarm had been raised. I skidded to a halt when I spotted a group of men standing in the road with weapons—swords, axes, crossbows—and they gave a start when they locked eyes on me. The men from Avare were ready.

“Get the beast!” one shouted.

I tried to run back the way I'd come but knew the guards would be on their way after me too. I squeezed between two buildings, as I'd done earlier, but when I emerged on the other road, men were ready there too. I would never get back to the castle through the city streets!

I heard a crossbow twang, and a piece of wood skidded past my right paw, bounced off a cobblestone, and flipped to the side. From behind me, those with crossbows wouldn't have a chance at killing me, but that didn't mean I couldn't get hurt.

That thought was confirmed when a second bolt struck my right shoulder. Although shorter than an arrow by several inches, it was tipped with just as deadly a head. It tore into my shoulder and stuck. The pain was nothing like I anticipated. I'd somehow thought it would feel like being pricked by a needle.

It was nothing like pricking my finger on a needle.

I yelped as my right leg collapsed, making me stumble, but I caught myself. A third bolt struck my shoulder as well, hindering my ability to run. Any amount of weight on that leg caused pain to radiate down to my paw and up into my neck. If I stayed on the main road, I could end up on someone's wall as décor.

Without any other choice, I headed for the Mandon Forest. Voices clamored around me.

"It's getting away!"

"Into the woods!"

"Catch the beast!"

"Kill it!"

I whimpered. Each step brought waves of pain. If I were human, I could have at least still run with a wounded shoulder. Then again, were I human, they would have seen I was their *princess* and never attacked me in the first place.

Once in the safety of the trees, I took a moment to consider my options. The wound in my shoulder had a heartbeat of its own, and the coppery scent of metal filled my nose. The only option I could see was to carry around the back of the castle and enter through the secret passage.

As long as I could stay ahead of the hunters, I would make it.

They didn't even have a reason to hunt me. I'd only run through their city!

Of course, I *was* an unnaturally large wolf with horns . . . anyone would know I was a magical beast of some sort. Magical beasts were supposed to be locked away in the Weeping Woods.

The voices behind me faded, for which I was grateful. I was even tempted to slow my pace, but the pain in my shoulder was an excruciating reminder of how foolish, and potentially deadly, that would be. I needed to get into the safety of the castle.

I tried not to focus on the pain as I carried on through the trees until their trunks parted like curtains and I saw the meadow and familiar castle walls. I knew if I could make it inside, I could barricade the door shut until I could figure out what to do.

Without any signs of trouble, I ran for it.

I barely made it clear of the trees when three men jumped in front of me, blocking my path.

I hadn't anticipated a trap.

"Halt!" they shouted.

Even more men stepped out from the trees. A couple of them glanced up, and I followed their gaze to the parapets on the castle walls. Even more men stood with arrows and bolts directed at me.

"What do you want at the castle, beast?" one man snapped.

My tail sunk between my legs and I pinned my ears back. If they caught me, they might kill me. Worse, throw me into the Weeping Woods to live out the rest of my days trapped in an unknown hole.

My animal instincts were telling me to run.

My human stubbornness was telling me it was my home, they were my people, and I was their princess. They *had* to listen to me! They had to.

A man stepped forward, his sword drawn.

Princess or not, I was a beast.

I didn't stand a chance against trained men.

I had to trust my wolf instincts and run.

"He's going to run for it!"

"Stop it!"

I sprinted back for the safety of the trees but not before another bolt hit my right flank.

I gritted my teeth and ran as hard as the pain allowed me to. The tree branches snagged at my fur. I knew any hunter would be able to follow my

giant footprints, blood, and broken branches and underbrush in my wake. I needed to get out of the forest and break their ability to follow me somehow.

I came out of the shallow forest and onto the open meadows spread in the valley below the castle. After a quick glance, I turned northward and sprinted. Each bounding step carried me further away from Avare, further away from my castle, and further away from everything I knew.

My running slowed until I was at a limping trot, but I pressed on. The Darning Forest was up ahead, but it felt like I was in a nightmare where I was running but the object in the distance never got closer.

Eventually, I collapsed at the Troll River to catch my breath.

The farm town of Chorse sat to my left, and I hoped I was far enough away no child would spot me. Each breath sent radiating waves of pain through my body. When I could somewhat breathe without feeling I may die, I forced myself to get back to my feet.

I couldn't go to the bridge near Chorse for fear of discovery.

Luckily for me, the river didn't seem to be flowing too quickly at this time of year.

The runoff from the mountains of Zelig fed the largest river in Arington. Back before my father had banished all magical creatures, trolls enjoyed making themselves at home under our bridges. It was nice to not have to stop and pay a toll every time we crossed since they'd been banished.

I stared at the water, hearing my father's voice while I watched the ripples curve around a rock. "Don't you ever go near that river. The Troll River appears shallow, but many children and drunkards have lost their lives trying to swim across it. It moves faster than it looks."

Keltin had even been grounded once for getting too close to the water.

But I wasn't a child, and I wasn't drunk, and there was no other way to get to the other side unless I braved swimming across. Even if it did take me down a ways, I could still get out before reaching Chorse entirely.

Or so I thought.

The instant I leapt into the wide river, I regretted my decision. The water immediately caught me and swept me downstream. In spite of my strength as a wolf, I was no match for the mighty current. I tried to fight it, panting as the pain in my arm became white-hot and sent bursts of stars into my vision. Against my will, I gave up using my right arm altogether.

The river carried me quickly toward Chorse and finally deposited me near the bridge. Fortunately, I'd reached the opposite shore. I dragged myself out on the smooth stones beside the bridge, but unfortunately, underneath that bridge, three children sat with fishing lines.

Frozen in fear, they gave me wide-eyed looks.

I shook off, keeping a watchful eye on them as I limped up the banks.

Everything in my body wanted to collapse and let them take me, but the concern for my life won out when the boys under the bridge let out screams and ran up the opposite bank, frantically shouting.

"A beast climbed out of the river!"

"There's a river monster!"

"Heeeelp!"

I groaned and began running again before anyone had time to grab weapons and chase me.

Darning Forest was near.

Finally I burst through the trees. Only then did I slow to a pitiful walk and limped until I could physically go no further.

I collapsed somewhere beside a shallow river I didn't remember the name of. I panted in both pain and absolute exhaustion. My body was so weary I rested my chin beside the water so I could lap at it. I'd never run that hard or long in my life!

My eyelids grew heavy, but I hadn't run the last few hours to collapse in the open and be caught regardless! I spotted a boulder nearby with signs of an animal den of some sort. Judging by the lack of scent, it had been abandoned a while ago. I dragged myself over and found just enough strength left to dig myself a wider gap and slip under.

At least inside a den, I would have a fighting chance to wake before the hunters took me.

Completely spent, I succumbed to my exhaustion and fell asleep.



FIVE

MY STOMACH GROWLED SO LOUDLY IT WOKE ME FROM MY SL hunger, the sensation so strong it made me nauseous. I crawled out from under my stone hideaway. Overhead, the sun's rays bled through the leaves of the trees. On any other day, this may have been a beautiful, perfect autumn day in the forest.

But I wasn't familiar with these trees, paths, streams, or rivers. I knew the Weeping Woods was located at the far western side of the Darning Forest, but I couldn't remember what part of the Darning Forest I'd entered. It wasn't exactly like someone had put a sign in the ground labeling the beginning of the dangerous part of the forest, and everywhere I looked, the trees were the same, the flowers were the same, and the bushes were the same as in any other forest in Arington. If I had accidentally entered into the Weeping Woods, I wasn't sure that I would even know.

My ear twitched, and I looked up, startled. The fluttering from the bird's wings wasn't directly overhead as I thought, but several yards in front of me. The sound of footsteps of something just out of sight caused me to swallow hard with worry. I drew a deep breath, trying to convince myself that these sounds were always in the forests, but as I took that breath, I could smell things far more potently than ever before. I could smell the dirt, leaves, flowers, bark, and river—not to mention smells I couldn't identify directly, though I imagined they were animals due to the musky furriness to the scent.

And then it dawned on me.

I had heightened senses of smell and hearing, just like a wolf. As my stomach growled again, I prayed these stronger senses would help me to find some food, sooner rather than later, and then I could start thinking of a plan to get back to the castle and help my family and friends without being killed.

I would follow the river downstream, but the thought of food made me hesitate. Although I'd never been one to enjoy hunting, I'd gone with Keltin and my father several times and knew how to hunt on horseback with a bow. This was different. I had no weapons to use except for my teeth and claws and knew nothing about hunting like a wolf. The idea of tearing into

a creature and devouring it like an animal was not particularly appealing, but finding a table set up with roast chicken and potatoes was going to be impossible.

Keep your head on straight, I told myself. You're currently a beast, not a princess, and you're going to have to eat or die. Those are your only two options.

The river I'd found before was further away than I remembered it being, and as soon as I spotted it, my mouth salivated. I quickened my pace, limping heavily from the bolts still stuck in my shoulder. My body felt weak, but at least my shoulder had stopped bleeding.

The animal path dipped down toward the water, and as I neared, I caught a new scent in the air. Something I hadn't noticed until that moment. Unfortunately, I wasn't raised a wolf and had no idea how to interpret all those smells.

I cautiously reached the water's edge and began to drink, keeping my gaze along the riverbank.

My eyes locked on a large buck slightly downstream.

He stared at me with enormous eyes, anticipating the need to spring away. I knew it would be stupid for me to try and chase down a deer alone. I was a massive wolf, and he would be far more agile than me. Even if I was in perfect health, with no pack to assist, there was very little chance I would catch him.

My shoulder still hurt more than any wound I'd obtained in my entire life. I turned to take a proper look. It was covered in blood, and the bolts were still embedded. I tried reaching back, grabbing the closest shaft between my teeth, and pulling, but I had the wrong angle and only managed to tear my flesh more, making me let out a howl of agony.

As my pain subsided, I lifted my eyes to where the buck had been, but he was gone. I let my gaze shift to the fish lazily swimming at the bottom of the water and wondered if I might have any luck catching one of them. I'd fished with my father, but fish never was my favorite. I didn't like the taste.

I stepped into the water.

The fish seemed to sense my presence and drifted a little bit nearer the center of the river. I slowly lowered my head until my muzzle nearly touched the water. I could only hope one of the stupid fish would come near me again. Keltin used to tell me fish were practically brainless. Brainless or

not, they still didn't seem to like me being there. Maybe they could smell me too.

I stood in the same position for what felt like hours before the fish started to swim near me again, and I bravely sprung, only to end up with a mouthful of pebbles.

I snorted water from my nose and shook my head.

The fish had disappeared.

My stomach sank until a light flicker in the water caught my eye. I carefully drew near to find more fish close to an outcropping of trees by the bank.

I licked my snout—something I never thought I would say—and sprang again. And again. And again. Finally, on the sixth or seventh attempt, I closed my mouth around a thick fish and pulled it from the water. I couldn't help but be impressed with myself. I had caught a fish with my *teeth*, though I would leave that part of the story out when I got back and told Keltin.

I lay down on the bank and pushed all thoughts aside of how unladylike I looked digging into a fish. I devoured it the best I could, trying not to gag at the crunch of bones.

When I'd finished eating as much as I could, I rinsed my nose and paws off in the cool water of the river. The fish would hopefully tide me over until I could get something bigger. I could travel down to one of the nearby towns and try to get a chicken or even a sheep. Those wouldn't be hard to catch with them already being in pens.

I did know one thing, though, and that was how to follow my gut instinct, which told me something wasn't right. There was some sort of unseen danger. There was no sign of a threat, no sound of anyone moving. Perhaps the instinct of danger was only my brain trying to figure out what that smell was.

A branch overhead snapped.

I barely had time to register it before I was yanked into the air by a rope net tangled around me. I'd walked right onto a trap and now hung several feet over the dirt path. On one hand—or paw—I hadn't been caught in one of the cruel metal hunting traps. On the other, who knew how long the net trap had been lying there? And who knew when the hunter would reappear? This wasn't how I imagined spending my day.

I tried to assess my position. I was wrapped up in a net, one leg caught in a hole, and I was over a seemingly well-used path. I was unable to pull my leg back in to gain any sort of leverage, and my other limbs were trapped close to my body due to the net and the laws of gravity. Luckily, I could still use my teeth. But even then, the task was tedious. Gnawing on the rope made my teeth feel hot. I'd barely broken through one strand, and my jaw was already hurting. At this rate, I would be up in a tree for a week!

I smelled something I didn't recognize—no big surprise there—and looked down at the ground. A tall young man with dark-brown hair stood staring up at me. So this was the hunter who had captured me? He didn't look impressive at all.

He looked me up and down, a little smirk playing on his lips. He wore a boring gray jacket with an unexciting shirt underneath, dark pants, and well-worn boots that needed to be replaced. His hair was long but braided back on both sides in two separate braids and bound behind his head in a tail—a peasant look.

"You've been making quite the fuss, darling." The stranger walked to the trunk. Suddenly, the net lowered until my body rested against the ground, but he hadn't released the net completely. Of course, if I were a hunter about to kill a wolf, I wouldn't drop the leverage either.

The hunter pulled a dagger from his belt. I planted my feet on the ground and started pulling and tugging against the tree. Surely, the branch would have to break or the net would have to give.

He glanced at the dagger and let out a frustrated sigh. "You're getting yourself all tangled. I'm only going to cut the net off you."

I glared at him. *Do you think I am stupid? You are going to destroy your own hunting net to free me? Ha!*

I bared my teeth and growled.

"Relax. I can tell you're already exhausted. You're panting."

I growled again and pulled.

Suddenly, there was some slack, but only some, but as soon as I felt it, the net pressed me against the ground. The clever hunter had stepped onto the net, pulling it tightly around me and giving him the upper hand. He had my head pinned onto the ground.

Had I been any ordinary wolf, I would likely have been stumped. But I was a princess, and I had seen my own reflection. I wasn't a normal-sized

wolf, and I knew I was smarter. I kicked the ground and rolled, trying to get my mouth and sharp teeth to dig into his foot.

“Your back leg is stuck! If you keep twisting like that, the ropes are going to break it!” he snapped.

I stopped moving. I couldn’t move my head to see if what he said was right, but my back leg had been through one of the holes in the net, and it had started aching.

The young man nodded slowly. “See?” He pulled something off his belt that was made out of leather strips, but I couldn’t make out what it was until he said, “I’m just going to put this over your mouth so you don’t bite me.”

I had seen hunting dogs and war dogs wearing muzzles. I tried to pull my head away again, baring my teeth as I did so.

“Easy. I’m not going to kill you.” He gently started sliding it over my nose.

I growled in protest and snapped at him.

He recoiled and grabbed his dagger. He drew a breath and glared at me. “Stupid creature. I already said I wasn’t going to kill you, even though I could, and no one would think otherwise. After all, you are the one that killed the royal family, not to mention the guests who came to visit for the autumn ball, and every hunter and available soldier in Arington is out searching for you.”

His words hit me hard. I hadn’t done such a thing!

He secured the muzzle over my mouth.

Of course I had to test it, and indeed, my mouth wouldn’t open.

“I need to bring you back to Advisor Roland alive. There’s a hefty reward, and I need it.” His green eyes looked down at me for a moment. “You’re no ordinary wolf.”

Was it the horns that gave me away? I thought miserably.

He pulled a bundle of rope from his shoulder and slid the loop over my head.

A muzzle and a leash? Absolutely not!

I started kicking at the dirt again and managed to get my feet under me enough that with a quick yank, the boy’s stance became unstable and I pulled his feet out from under him. He rolled, quickly scrambling away from me and held his dagger out as if it would really protect him from a beast as large as I.

“Fool!” He sucked air in between his teeth and slowly relaxed his shoulders. “I’m going to release the net. Nice and easy.” Although he looked at me as he spoke, it appeared he were comforting himself and not me.

I could keep fighting while wrapped up in a net, or I could wait for my opportunity and wait for him to pull it off me. I decided to wait.

The hunter kept his eyes on me as he rummaged through the bundle of rope and pulled one strand of it. The knot somehow dissolved and the entire net relaxed. He tossed the edges aside, untangling me from the mess of rope.

“Nice and calm,” he said softly.

I got to my feet and faced him. I narrowed my eyes. If he thought I was going to walk with him like a good little dog . . .

Then again, he *could* get me back to the castle, especially if Advisor Roland had sent the order to have me captured. He must not have been at the ball the night before. Still, it meant I would need to either convince this stranger I was the princess before we arrived or convince my father’s most strict advisor.

I didn’t like the odds of trying to convince Advisor Roland.

The boy straightened and pulled tightly on the rope around my neck. “The horns are different. Where did you come from?” he asked.

I growled in response and tried to paw the handmade muzzle off my mouth.

“You’re going with me. You covered a lot of ground while fleeing, but it shouldn’t take too long to get back.” He turned and pulled again.

I didn’t budge. I was *not* going to be paraded around with a muzzle and leash.

He slowly turned and looked over his shoulder. “You think you’re smarter than me?”

I relaxed my face, tilted my head, and nodded.

The hunter stared at me. “Can . . . can you understand me?” he asked.

I nodded more eagerly this time.

His green eyes ignited with joy. He ran his hand over his face, calming his excitement with the movement. “Remarkable. I am talking to a wolf”—the boy put his free hand on top of his head—“and the wolf is actually responding.” He shook his head as he studied my face. “I’ve got to take you

back to the castle. All of the hunters in the kingdom are looking for you. Will you come willingly?"

I wanted to say no, but any other hunter would have thought they were hallucinating and probably would have killed me immediately. I had to put some trust in this stranger. I nodded and pawed at the muzzle again.

"That stays on," he said firmly. "Your claws are bad enough, but if you want to walk willingly, I recommend you do so. I don't want to try and find a horse and cart and come back for you."

I let out a huff.

He tugged gently on the rope. "I won't kill you, but you've got to walk with me."

My first step reminded me of the wounds in my shoulder. I took another slow step, trying to hide my limp because my pride wouldn't allow him to see how much pain I felt.

"Good. See? We're off to a good start." He smiled and began walking down the river's path. "Do you have a name?"

I nodded.

"Hm." His eyes looked me over again.

I had one, but how would I bark that to him? I couldn't put my finger—or paw—on it, but he seemed pleasant enough. He was quiet. Old enough to shave, because I could see a day's worth of stubble on his face. His cheap clothing seemed to be from Terricina. Yet his silence and humble appearance somehow made him more fascinating to me.

In truth, I didn't know if I should trust him, but he hadn't run away screaming when I responded to his questions in my very unwolfish way.

Little things.

We walked along the riverbank through the Darning Forest. I suddenly wished I hadn't run so far so fast. Walking at this rate would take us all day to make it back to the castle—if not longer!

I have one day to convince this boy that I am his princess, the castle is under an enchantment, and he needs to help me. That should be completely easy in the body of a wolf, I thought to myself sarcastically.

The wounds on my shoulder burned, and I could have sworn the metal heads of the bolts were sawing at my muscles. After less than an hour, I began to limp heavily, yet the hunter didn't look over his shoulder or even seem to notice my slowed pace.

I wondered what he was thinking. He was likely stunned to have an enchanted wolf on the end of the rope he carried. What would I say to a wolf in this situation? I would ask a bunch of yes-or-no questions. Did I have a name? Yes. Can you show me where you live? Yes. Can you talk? No. But there had to be another way I could communicate.

Of course!

I could write! I just needed a good spot to try.

We finally stopped when we reached the edge of the woods, and the hunter sat down on a large lichen-covered boulder. "I can see you are slowing. Get some water. I need to eat some food." He opened his water pouch and looked out over the open expanse between the Darning Forest and the castle. "We won't make it back before nightfall." He leaned over and rummaged through his pack. "You're too slow."

I sat on the ground and stared at him. *He* needed to eat? And what about me?

He tore into a piece of jerky and looked at me.

I stared harder.

He paused. "Oh, uh, I suppose you're hungry?"

I tilted my head. *No, I'm just staring at you because I think it's fun.*

He held out the jerky he'd been eating. I took great pride that I wasn't entirely disgusted that he was feeding me the filthy piece of dry meat that had just touched his lips.

I, however, refused to move because the rope still bound my mouth shut.

He exhaled through his nose. "You're rather stubborn."

I nodded once.

He chuckled and shook his head. "I still can't believe I am speaking with a wolf." He set the jerky on his lap and leaned his hand out to me. "I'm going to untie your mouth. If you even snap at me, I'm tying it shut again and I don't care if you starve until we get back."

I clenched my teeth.

"Do you understand?" he added in a rather condescending tone.

I nodded once again.

"Good girl."

I resisted the urge to growl at him and sat completely still while he untied my mouth. He sat back on his rock and held the same piece of meat out to me. This time, I accepted it and chewed it twice before swallowing. It was

seasoned with spices and tasted rather delicious. I tilted my head again.

“Begging for more, huh?” I could have sworn I saw a smirk toying at the corner of his lips, but it never broke. He took two more pieces out and allowed me to eat them, then dusted off his hands while chewing his handful of dried berries. He leaned in, and I realized he was assessing my injuries. “I see your wounds. I’ll leave those in so you don’t have to deal with the bleeding all day. I’ll take care of it properly when we stop for the day.”

I looked around the ground. The banks of the river here were covered in small pebbles, and I couldn’t try writing my name there. What did pass as the path was barely wide enough to walk, but it would work.

Pain exploded up my right arm, white hot, and I let out a whimper in spite of myself. I had to try and write with my left paw, but I had to put my weight on my right paw to keep myself balanced, which seemed even worse. Eventually, I had to switch between my left and right until I managed to etch my name in the dirt, even if the letters were a mess.

The hunter was suddenly by my side. “Is . . . ma? Is-ma what? Is-ma-e. Oh.” He looked at me. “Ismae?”

I nodded and let out an excited bark. Humiliating, really, but I had to tell him he was right.

“You’re Ismae? *Princess* Ismae?”

I nodded again.

“Right . . .” He sized me up with a glance, but I couldn’t interpret his expression. “We need to get moving. Come on.” He climbed to his feet.

I looked down at the dirt. It wasn’t terrible, and in my eyes, it was enough for him to know I was his princess. He shrugged me off like I was nothing but a . . . beast. I knew then I would have to put a stronger effort into proving who I was. I just had to figure out how.

As we started walking again, I wished the boy had at least given me his name so I could curse him properly. My shoulder was killing me.

We hugged the bank of the river for what seemed like hours, heading eastward, until we left the woods and journeyed out into the meadows. The young man kept glancing over his shoulder at me. Evidently, I was slowing him down because he was frowning.

The sounds of birds quieted, and frogs began to chirp as the sky overhead changed from afternoon shades of blue to watercolor purples, yellows, and

oranges. It was then I chose to stop, holding my paw from the ground to alleviate the pain.

The young man let out an annoyed sigh, stopped, and faced me. He tugged on the rope. "We are near an area where we can camp. Keep walking."

I didn't budge from my spot.

His jaw flexed and narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "I promise, it's not far. And it's a decent fishing spot, too, so we could have fresh fish for dinner."

I looked at the river right beside us, hinting that we could just stay here and still get fish.

"Yes, there's a river here, but the rocks make it difficult to actually catch anything without breaking your line. Do you understand?"

Making sure to grumble as I walked forward, I conceded, earning a nod from the hunter. Luckily he was honest, and the walk wasn't too far. There was a little grass-covered hill, a circle of burnt rocks from a fire, and a rock-free area of the river for him to catch his fish. Our fish. I really had hoped for something bigger than a fish for dinner, though.

"I'll get some wood for the fire, and then I can look at that wound on your shoulder," he said, securing the rope leash to a nearby tree.

I rolled my eyes and lay down on the grassy hill, grateful for the soft blades of grass to curl up on. I could slip the rope off my neck, even chew through it, but I didn't want to spend any more energy than needed. Besides, he was going to help me.

I hoped.



SIX

THE LAST OF THE SUN DISAPPEARED, AND THE NIGHT GLOWED. The moon. I felt a slow tingle rush over my body from head to toe like when you step outside on a brisk fall morning and the cold is a little uncomfortable, and goose bumps spread all over.

My keen ears picked up on the hunter humming as he returned to camp, his arms heavy with dry sticks and branches. He passed by me and set the sticks in the circle of stones. He arranged the smaller sticks in the middle and then stacked the taller sticks to form some sort of tower.

He dusted his hands and leaned back on his heels. "There we go. Let's take a look at that wound." He turned and froze.

I slowly twitched a brow. "Surprise? I'm still here?"

The hunter's lips parted, then closed. His gaze darted around the woods but kept coming back to me. "Uh, I'm sorry, but . . . are you the wolf?"

"Are you blind?"

"Not at all."

My eyes widened. He'd responded to my question. I suddenly realized my voice was mine. It wasn't a growl or a bark. It was my own voice! I put my hand over my mouth—*my* hand! I quickly looked over my body to discover I still wore my nightgown. It was covered in dirt, but it was still mine.

I gasped, then hugged myself. "I'm not a wolf anymore! I'm me! Yes! Clothing! And—" I was wearing *only* my nightgown. I let out a shout of frustration. "Nightgown? I'm stuck in my nightgown? Ugh! Fetch me a blanket. I don't suppose you have a dress in that pack of yours?"

The boy's brow twitched, and he blinked before slowly rummaging through his pack.

I got to my feet and glowered at him. "Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

He arched a brow. "Yes. Are you going to command me to stop doing that?"

"Yes! That isn't how you treat your queen!"

He leaned forward, looked me in the eye, and then rolled his eyes with dramatic emphasis. "First of all, young miss, you aren't queen, you haven't been coronated as such, and therefore you don't hold that title."

I scoffed. “Yet I am the last surviving member of the royal family, and *therefore*, you have to obey me!”

“Except you’re not.”

I placed my hands on my hips. “My castle has been put under an enchantment. Everyone inside has been transformed into some sort of object, therefore I *am* the acting queen until everything is righted. You think I don’t hold any rights as royalty?”

“You can’t run around claiming to be the one in charge when the crown prince is still alive as well as your parents.” He gave a simple, nonchalant shrug.

I balled my hands into fists, the familiar burning anger boiling in my stomach. “How dare you speak back to me in such a way! If we were at the castle, I would have you—”

The hunter gave a frustrated sigh. “But we aren’t. And you can’t do anything about it. And it makes you angry.” He gave me a smug smirk before he knelt in front of the tower of sticks he’d made. He held his hand out and whispered a word, “Allul.”

Sparks flung from the palm of his hand, igniting the sticks into flame.

I gasped. “You have magic?”

The hunter moved his gaze to me but nothing else. “Yes.”

“It’s illegal here!”

“Yes.” He dug into his pack and then pulled out a coiled fishing line.

“You just broke the law.”

“I liked you better as a beast,” he mumbled.

“Excuse me?” I nearly shrieked.

He turned to me. “Will you *please* stop talking?”

I held my right arm close to my body. “I command you to tell me your name and then take care of this wound on my shoulder.”

“You can’t command everyone to do everything for you.”

“Do you see any way for me to take care of this on my own?” I shouted back.

The boy shook his head and then glanced at the sky, flexing his jaw. It wasn’t an answer to my question. “Sit by the fire.”

“You haven’t given me your name.”

“Do you want me to take care of your wound or not?” he snapped back, finger pointed at the spot beside the fire.

I held my head high, walked past him, and took my seat. “You never fetched a blanket for me.”

“And I won’t if you keep ordering me around. It won’t get terribly cold tonight, so you’d—”

“I’m wearing only a nightgown while *you* are wearing full clothing, including pants! Don’t you tell me I won’t freeze tonight.”

The boy ran one hand down his face, the other balled in a fist, and made the same noise he’d done when I’d met him—sucking air in between his teeth. “You know, I’ve met a few princesses. None of them are as beastly as you. And yes, I meant to say it that way.”

I set my jaw and turned away. “I don’t need your help.”

“Oh? I’d love to watch you get those bolts out on your own.”

I didn’t look at him, though I saw movement from the corner of my eye. When I reached up to smooth my hair, my hands halted. Apparently, my horns weren’t going away in spite of me being a human again—which I found terribly inconvenient.

I grabbed the shaft of the bloodstained bolt and yanked as hard as I could. It slid out easily, but the wave of pain that hit me as soon as it was free caused me to sway, and I collapsed onto my side.

The hunter knelt in front of me, put his hand on my shoulder, and pulled out the other one quickly and without apology.

I screamed.

“There.” He pressed his hand against my shoulder, hard. “I know it hurts, but you have to stop the bleeding. I noticed blood on your, uh, rear as well.”

I bit my bottom lip. I had barely paid attention to that wound. The bolt must have only cut my right butt cheek and not pierced it.

“I left them in all day to help stifle the bleeding. Unfortunately it appears that may have been a bad choice,” he muttered. “I may need to stitch the wounds closed.”

“S-stitch? As in needle and thread?” I turned my head to give him a wide-eyed look.

He raised a brow and met my gaze. “Is there any other way to stitch?”

The firelight danced across his face, and something in those green eyes called out to me. He was handsome. Incredibly handsome. His jaw was strong, eyes mysterious and set deep beneath expressive brows, and his chin almost had a dimple. I imagined his cheeks would dimple if he ever chose

to smile.

“Will the stitches scar?” I asked.

He shrugged a shoulder. “I could use magic if you prefer. But it appears magic is outlawed in your country.” He made a point of keeping his eyes on mine.

“I . . . would like that.”

“To break the law so you can be healed without a scar? *Tsk.*” He grabbed my left hand, put it over his, then slid his hand out so I was holding my own bandage. “That’s not how the real world works here in Arington. Now, I’m going to catch some fish so we can eat.” He walked back to the edge of the river while I stared in shock after him.

“But I’m the princess. You should be helping me first!”

The boy turned with an annoyed look. “And how do I know you’re the princess?” He tossed his line and hook into the water.

I blinked. “Because I am. I told you already!”

“And I should take you for your word? A wolf? An *enchanted* wolf, for that matter.”

“You truly don’t believe me?” I stared at him, completely taken back. I wasn’t lightheaded anymore and tried to sit up without taking my hand off my shoulder.

“Why should I?”

“Not everyone is evil,” I argued.

“That’s one thing you’ve said that actually makes me believe you’re a princess.” He shook his head then looked over his shoulder. “You have no idea what people are capable of when they have no other choice. You’ve clearly never been out amongst your own people or seen what they endure. That being said, you could also be really good at pretending. For all I know, you could be a witch.” He twitched his eyebrows.

I frowned. “I’m not old, and I’m certainly not ugly.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing.” He suddenly tugged on the string wrapped around his hand and yanked it from the water. Along with it came a good-size fish. He promptly laid it on the ground, grabbed a stone, and—to my absolute horror—smashed the fish on the head.

I gasped and put my hand over my mouth.

The boy didn’t even look at me. “It’s a quicker way for it to die than to have it suffocate out of water.”

Whenever my father and I had gone fishing, we'd dropped the fish into a pail of water, and he'd carried it home. I'd never known what happened to them after that. I supposed I had my answer.

I licked my lips and, hoping to change the subject, said, "I'm not a witch. I was turned into this."

"Which is what you would say if you were a witch."

I tried not to scowl at him. "I think it was Prince Ulrich. He was mad at me because I had him arrested for using magic."

The stranger inclined his head. "If he was arrested, how could he enchant you?"

My lips tightened. "You mentioned people are out searching for me. So, is your entire family out hunting me?"

"No. And no one is out searching for a woman. They're hunting a beast."

I nodded. "Where is your family, then?"

"I don't have one."

I suddenly felt my stomach churn. "I-I'm sorry."

He shrugged.

"Did you ever have family?"

I saw the end of him rolling his eyes as he turned his head to look at me. "Of course I did. At some point, everyone has a family. How else could I have gotten here?" He tugged his line again, grabbed it with both hands, pulled, released a little, and pulled again, eventually hauling out an even larger fish than the previous one.

"Fine. Tell me about your family."

"Why do you care?" he snapped.

I glared. "I'm trying to make conversation. That's usually what one does when sitting with people over dinner."

The boy lowered his chin, his eyes telling me how annoyed he was without his lips needing to move. I didn't understand what I'd done to rub him wrong, but for some reason, he and I were *not* going to get along.

I turned my face away so I wouldn't have to watch him kill the second fish, but it didn't mean I didn't hear it. "Will you at least give me your name?" I pried.

Silence settled between us.

I glanced over to see him slice his dagger into the belly of the fish and start pulling out the entrails. I gagged and turned my entire body away.

“You know my name. It is only fit I know yours.”

“I don’t think so. I’ve heard if a witch knows how to say your name, they can cast spells and control you.”

“For the last time, I’m not a witch!” I shouted.

“But you *are* annoying.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Then I’ll be forced to call you Hunter. Or shall I pick a worse name? Perhaps I’ll give you a woman’s name. Anna. I’ll call you Anna.”

“Anna’s” lips tightened.

I gave him my best princess grin in return.

“Call me Hunter, then,” he mumbled.

“Is that your name?”

“No.”

“Then Anna it is.” I shrugged, only to immediately gasp and grip my shoulder tighter. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I turned my face away from him so he couldn’t see them.

The unnamed stranger muttered something in a language I didn’t understand, and I heard a pot hiss over the fire. I braved a glance to see he’d put a pot of water onto it and was working on rubbing salt and pepper into the meat of the now open fish. He lay them out on two stones, their bodies flayed apart.

“Do you have bandages?” I asked much softer than my tone had been all night. “I’ll do it myself. I just . . . don’t have supplies. Or medicine.”

He lifted his gaze to me, and once again I felt a pull toward those secretive eyes. He rinsed his hands in the river, dried them on his pants, then walked to my side and knelt.

“I’m not asking for your help,” I reminded him, not meeting his gaze. “I really can do it myself. Just give me the supplies.”

“You can’t wrap this on your own.” He took a small glass vial from a pouch on his hip. The vial was so tiny, I wondered how it was even made. It was about the size of a walnut shell, and inside was a purple liquid with a pink glow. “I have a healing potion. It’s rare and extremely difficult to make. I can dilute it in the water and apply it to your wounds. It should help you heal faster.”

“Why not just give me all of it?”

He blinked. “I just said it’s difficult to make.”

“But not impossible.”

His eyes narrowed. “I already offered to give you some of it. I need the rest for myself.”

“Why?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can’t you just be grateful I’m even willing to give you *some* of it?”

I took a breath, but the radiating pain in my shoulder changed what I was about to say. “Yes. I’m sorry. I am . . . grateful to you.”

“I could blackmail you, you know. If you are the princess.” He twisted the cork off the bottle with his fingertips and tenderly tipped the vial of liquid to the water. Three drops splashed inside with a little fizzling noise. He pressed the cap back in and glanced my way.

“I suppose you could,” I finally answered. “But if I were a witch, wouldn’t that be dangerous?”

He watched me, and slowly a smile spread to his face. I was right. He was terribly handsome when he smiled. “You got me there.” He opened his pack and scoured the contents until he pulled a bundle of bandages from the bottom.

“What would you ask for? Money? Status? Freedom for all magical creatures?”

“The autumn stone.” He scooted closer to me and gently moved my hand away from the blood-soaked material on my wound.

I looked away. “The royal stone of Arington? What would you do with it?”

He lifted the pot from the fire with one hand, then slowly poured the warm liquid onto the bandage until it was wet enough he could pull it away from my scab.

I looked over my shoulder and watched. “That didn’t hurt at all.”

“The mistake people most often make when dealing with wounds is constantly removing and replacing bandages. When someone is wounded, you leave the bandage and pile on top of them because the blood creates a scab. If you pull the bandage off, you essentially pull the scab off with it, and everything begins bleeding again. You’re lucky I’m the hunter that found you.” He looked away from what he was doing and winked at me.

Once he had the fresh bundle of rags in his hands, he hesitated. “I really should do this under your nightgown, directly onto your skin so it holds

better. But I don't have a dress with me for you to wear."

"Then pull it down." I pulled on the neck of my dress.

"I'll have to cut it open."

"I don't care right now. I'm hungry, tired, and in pain." I closed my eyes.

"Hunter" cut from the neck to the tip of my sleeve, opening the nightgown to expose the full extent of the wound from the two crossbow bolts.

I braved a glance and saw two holes, both oozing vibrant red blood. They were so near each other they were more like one massive wound. No wonder it hurt so much.

Hunter shook his head. "They got you good. Whoever it was must have been a hunter or marksman." He glanced at me before continuing. "He knew he couldn't reach your heart for a kill shot, so he wounded you enough you would become lame. Knowing this, he would be hot on your trail. Luckily for you, you ran fast enough to get a good head start *and* were saved by me instead. But even adding the healing potion, this wound isn't going to heal fast enough before it gets infected, even if I properly replace your bandages for the next week. Stitching it closed is the only option now. It will hurt."

"I don't do well with pain," I mumbled.

"I can tell." He started wrapping some bandages around my shoulder. "I'm going to put this here for now. We will eat, and then I'll fix it. That way, if you pass out, you'll at least have a full belly." He braved another quick smile at me.

I returned the gesture with a weak smile of my own. "Thank you. I mean it. I'm . . . sorry we got off on the wrong foot."

I watched Hunter pull two forks from his pack and two plates. He gave me the bigger of the fish, for which I suddenly felt very ashamed. He had been the one to catch, clean, and prepare them. He'd also been the one to help me, and yet he took the smaller fish.

"Hunter, you should eat this." I held my plate out to him.

He waved it away and started eating his. He had his back against a tree, knees pulled up to create a table. "You haven't eaten much all day. Even if you're a small woman, you're a huge wolf. You need it more than me for tomorrow."

I was a tad surprised by this sudden act of kindness from a man who

seemed to hate my guts. Even if he didn't hate me, he didn't like me enough to give me his name. Regardless, I was more than grateful for the food. And, as promised, once I was done, Hunter scooted to my side, his needle and thread ready in his fingers.

"I've never had stitches before," I confessed, though he already knew.

He nodded. "This is going to hurt. If I had alcohol, I'd have you drink some to help take the edge off the pain."

I snorted. "I wouldn't drink it anyhow."

"Is it another thing forbidden in your country?" He used the water once again to pry the scabbed bandages from my shoulder.

"I'm allowed it on special occasions, but I've seen my share of drunkards in the gutter." I sniffed with my nose up.

Hunter shook his head in silence. "Do you wish to bite a stick?"

"I'm not a dog!"

He met my eyes. "Then don't bite through your lip." He jabbed the needle into my skin. He probably meant to do it far more gently than I thought it felt, but he was positively right about the pain.

He hadn't even finished pulling the thread through the first stitch before I begged him to stop. He ignored me, and a wave of nausea washed from the top of my head, down my shoulders, into my stomach.

"Don't throw up," he ordered. "I'm not cleaning you up if you pass out. No clean clothes, remember?"

I swallowed, nodding, but white sparks shot into my vision. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to focus on something—anything—other than the pain coursing through my shoulder and down my arm.

I didn't know at what point I lost consciousness, whether it was before or after the second stitch. But when I came to, Hunter was breaking off the thread with his teeth.

He smirked at me. "That was perfect timing. And you managed not to throw up." He patted my back and then got to his knees to reach his pack. He pulled a blanket out, which he tossed over me, although he carefully lowered it down on my shoulder. "I added some more of the healing water to the wound, so hopefully the pain will at least be tolerable in the morning. This will all be over when we get back to the castle."

I swallowed the bile stinging the back of my tongue. "Thank you. Again."

He hesitated. "You're welcome." He tossed some more logs into the fire,

then rested his back against one of the trees.

“Will you not sleep?” I asked faintly.

“I will, here and there. But I don’t sleep much.”

“Why is that?”

“You ask a lot of questions.” He withdrew his dagger and a whetstone from his pouch. He spat onto the stone and then began sharpening his blade, though I supposed it to be an unnecessary gesture to keep himself busy.

I looked up past the tree limbs into the night sky and smiled. “When I was a child, I begged my father to allow me to sleep outside with my brother. Just once. Of course he never did. He said it was too dangerous. I didn’t understand why until the magical creatures attacked a year or so ago. They completely destroyed one of our cities to the west.”

“Do you understand why?”

I shook my head and returned my gaze to him. “It doesn’t matter to me why. They killed innocent people.”

“You truly are unbelievable.”

I bit my tongue. It hadn’t been my intention to offend him.

Understanding our conversation to be over, I got as close to the fire as possible, curled up in a ball, and tried to get some sleep.

It turned out, sleeping under the stars wasn’t as exciting as I hoped it would be. The ground was so uncomfortable I didn’t know how anyone could possibly sleep on it! Every way I turned, there seemed to be a tree root, knob of stone buried beneath the dirt, or some other pesky thing digging into my ribs.

And then I saw the silhouette of a spider creeping its way across the stone on the edge of the fire. I bolted upright with a scream of fear and then grunt of pain.

Hunter was on his feet in an instant and at my side, looking into the darkness. “What is it? What did you see?”

“A spider! That means there are bugs all over!” I swatted at my messy brown hair, then nightgown, then legs.

Hunter released an audible sigh. “Ismae, we’re outside. There are going to be bugs. But the bats eat them.”

“Bats?” I gasped. “There are tales they eat people, not just bugs!”

He ran his hand over his face, mumbling to himself again in that foreign language. He crossed back over to his tree and then sat. “Get some sleep or

tomorrow is going to be exhausting.”

I pointed at him. “You keep bugs off me if you’re going to stay awake.”

He only shook his head at me and tilted his chin up to look at the stars.



SEVEN

I STRETCHED CAREFULLY, NOT WANTING TO CAUSE ANY MORE dull ache remained in my shoulder, but no pain. The hunter's healing potion was doing its job.

I groaned and let my body relax again before turning my head to get a look at the young man. He still sat with his back against the tree, but his eyes were closed and his head was tilted to the side. His chest slowly rose and fell with his sleeping breaths, and once again I was reminded how handsome he looked. His chiseled features appeared much softer when he was asleep.

The fire still burned, which meant he must have kept it going all night to keep me warm. He'd also given me his blanket.

How is he not freezing?

Were I any other girl, raised in any other house, I likely would have set to work cooking breakfast to show my gratitude. As it was, I hadn't been raised like any other girl, so I didn't get up.

"Did no one teach you it's impolite to stare?" Hunter yawned with a stretch and rubbed the base of his hands against his eyes. "I imagine you want some . . ." He lowered his hands, and his sentence died. "Well, you're not going to be very pleased."

"Why not?" I asked.

He arched a brow.

It sunk in that I hadn't heard my voice. I quickly sat up, only to discover my arms were wolf legs, my hands wolf paws, and I was covered in fur. I'd taken the form of the beast once again. Letting out a howl of dismay, I turned to the stranger, doing my best to plead for his help with my eyes.

Hunter rubbed his chin in thought. He finally got to his feet and gave me a smile. "This is good for me. I don't have to listen to you complain all day."

I bared my teeth.

"Blessed silence." He sighed emphatically. "I'm not going to try and catch more fish for breakfast. I'd like to leave as soon as possible."

He gave me a handful of berries to eat, which did nothing to calm my growling stomach, but Hunter reminded me we would reach the castle by

lunch, and then he would break the enchantment and all would go back to normal.

As we journeyed, I thought hard about our conversation the night before, about the enchantment and this handsome young man believing me to be a witch or some escapee from the Weeping Woods. I'd known all along Ulrich couldn't possibly have done this. The stranger I traveled with had more magic in him than Ulrich ever did.

But what I'd seen the night of the autumn ball suddenly became clear. I saw the old man, the rose in his hand, and heard his warning. "*Do not be deceived by looks alone or the truth of your heart will be shone.*" It was in rhyme. Had that been the spell?

I barked and felt my tail wagging behind me. *Yes! The old man had been the one to cast the enchantment on the castle! Surely it was for revenge for entrapping all the magic in the woods. He must have been making a political statement to try and change the law. Well, I'll show him when everything gets back to normal. I'll tell my father everything, and we'll hunt down this old man and punish him for his foolishness.*

Chorse came into view and, in the distance beyond, the castle.

My heart jumped. I couldn't wait for a proper meal, my comfortable mattress, feather pillow, and blanket. Of course, as we had been walking, I also pondered what would happen with the hunter. Once he had the autumn stone—the royal stone of power—and he lifted the spell, I'd have to find a way to get it back. He couldn't just take it. The gemstone had been part of Arington for generations. I was sure I could throw him in jail for something. He'd captured me, used magic, and I'd make something up if I had to.

I assumed the hunter would go around the town, but he walked down the road that led right through and across the bridge. I reached out and grabbed his sleeve with my teeth, then pulled him to stop.

The hunter tugged his arm away. "Get off me. You'll be fine walking through. It's not that big of a town."

How could he possibly *not* understand my fear of getting caught when he knew magical creatures weren't allowed in Arington? I was furious and tried growling at him, but he ignored me and carried on.

I kept my attention locked on the building as I neared it. It was a small dress shop. In the windows were glorious dresses positioned on frozen mannequins. I focused on how impressed I was with those, trying not to

worry about people who might see me but failed when a man stepped out of a book shop on my right carrying three books.

His gaze looked directly past the hunter and locked on me. “Wolf!” he shouted. He backed up until his back was against the door and he blindly reached for the handle. “The wolf is here!”

The hunter looked over his shoulder at me. “You’ve made your presence known, apparently.”

I wished I could tell him I tried to warn him, but he wouldn’t listen.

We were in trouble.

It didn’t take long before we heard voices and rushed footsteps—some running away from us, and others drawing nearer. I had no desire to wait any longer, even if the stupid boy was standing like a dumb tree in the middle of the road!

I sprinted for the bridge.

“Stop it!”

“Don’t let it cross!”

A handful of men—most carrying pitchforks, hoes, or other farming tools—jumped in front of me before I could reach the bridge. I wasn’t about to try hurling myself into the water again and backed up slowly.

Hunter stepped up to my side. I hadn’t realized he’d followed me. “She’s my catch,” he said calmly.

“We heard the castle was attacked,” the man furthest to the left shouted. He wore a shabby shirt covered in dirt, and his face was as red as a tomato. His dark brows pinched, and he glared at me hard.

“Oh?” the hunter responded. “From what I understood, the princess went missing.”

“Yes, and every other guest who attended the autumn celebration!” the tallest man added. He reeked of sweat and tanning leather.

“And who did you hear that from?” Hunter tilted his head, a look of distrust solid on his face.

“Prince Ulrich, of course. And a few others who went in when that beast”—he pointed to me with his pitchfork—“ran through Avare.”

Hunter shrugged a shoulder. “Did you think maybe she was trying to warn you?”

The men glanced nervously at each other.

“Not all magical beasts are dangerous.” Hunter looked down at me and

motioned with his hand. "Let's get to the castle."

A fat man stepped forward. "Why are you going to the castle?"

"My business is my own. I don't need to explain myself to you." The hunter was becoming quite annoyed. "But if you *must* know, Prince Ulrich sent me to guard the castle as a precaution."

I had to hand it to the stranger, he was good at lying, manipulative, and smart.

"You all know Prince Ulrich uses magic," Hunter carried on. "And right now, he trusts me more than anyone else."

Anger changed to doubt on each of the men's faces.

Reluctantly, they stepped aside, muttering to each other about how they didn't know if they could trust the stranger or not, but if Ulrich had sent him, they had to trust he could help. I didn't even know if I could trust him, but so far, he was my only answer in returning to my real form.

I stayed close to his side while walking past the men and across the bridge. Only after we were on the other side did I breathe in relief.

"See?" Hunter muttered. "Feed people what they want to hear and everything falls into place."

I stole one last glance at the confused men. I wasn't sure I would explain a single thing when I returned to my human form. They could believe whatever they wanted when everything was normal.

From Chorse, it only took us a couple of hours to reach Avare.

Hunter stopped a good distance from town, glanced at the sky, then glanced at the castle. "Is there another way in? I've heard the castle has a secret entrance." He shifted his gaze to me. "I fear if someone from the town sees you, they may try and attack you again."

Of course there was a secret entrance. Every castle had one as an alternate escape route for the royal family. I didn't want to show him because if he wanted to come back, he could use that entrance. But had no choice if I wanted to be rid of the enchantment. I knew we wouldn't make it through Avare as easily.

I led the boy around the eastern side of the castle to the same spot I'd tried to run to a day earlier when I'd been attacked and chased away. Today, however, no men stood on the parapets, and the castle looked just as empty as when I'd run away.

Even though we were on the border of Ashwrya, no northerners had come

over the Dragon Mountains separating our land from theirs. We were in a peace treaty with Zelig, Griswil, and Terricina too. Despite our peace, I'd been reminded once a year of the secret entrance's location, and now I was grateful to have a separate way into the castle so I wouldn't be hunted again.

Finally, I spotted the correct stone that would release the entrance. I pressed it with my nose. The stone wall grated, and a little puff of dust floated out from the crack between the stones. I nudged it, and it swung inward to the small courtyard near the gardens.

"That's it?"

I looked at Hunter.

"No traps to release, spells to disarm, or anything like that? Merely a stone to press?"

I shrugged and kicked the door closed as soon as he was through it.

He looked up at my castle, gaze shifting from one window to the next, before he finally began to follow me.

We entered the tangible silence of the castle. I directed him through the kitchen, down the hall, and started past the ballroom.

However, he stopped and looked in. "All of these objects . . . are people?"

I nodded, hating my forced silence.

"The enchantment is more powerful than I thought," he mumbled. He straightened. "Take me to the autumn stone. We'll use its power to release the enchantment and return all to as it should be."

I went to the first place I thought the autumn stone could be—my parents' bedroom. I hinted with my nose to the carved cedar box sitting on the mantel.

The nameless boy sifted through various trinkets on the mantel: statues, two vases of wilting flowers, and a box of aromatic herbs my mother kept well-stocked. He even lifted the corner of the painting of my father and mother that hung over the fireplace.

Idiot. I growled to let him know he hadn't tried to open the cedar box.

The hunter looked at me and hovered his hand over the objects until he finally put his hand on the box.

I rolled my eyes.

He opened the lid, and when I saw the expression on his face, I knew it was empty before he tilted it to me.

“Guess again.”



EIGHT

WE SPENT THE NEXT SEVERAL HOURS SEARCHING THE CASTLE even Keltin's, and continued all the way up each floor of the castle until we finally reached one of the upper towers. The tower was stuffed full of shelves packed with dusty books. Some of the shelves were broken and the contents spilled onto the floor. It was clear from the cobwebs that nothing in the room had been touched for a very long time. Scrolls carefully bound with colored cords had been carefully placed in wooden crates or laid on the desk.

"An old wizard's tower?" Hunter whispered. His fingertips traced across the edge of the desk, over the open pages of a thick book with heavy pages, and finally stopped at a box. "What is this?" He took the box and dumped the contents into his hand.

A beautiful red stone dropped into his hand. The autumn stone—the royal symbol of Arington—was a gem a little too large to fit in a ring comfortably, but too small to be the focus of a necklace. It looked like it would adorn a dagger or sword rather well.

My heart jumped. "You found it." I put my hand to my throat, relieved to hear my voice. I looked at the window of the tower and saw the sun had settled over the horizon. I breathed in relief. "You found it. Now we can get rid of this—"

"Do you think me a fool?" The young man glared at the stone and then raised that glare to me.

I stared at him blankly. What did he mean?

"This isn't the autumn stone! It has no magic!" He threw the stone at me.

It bounced off my forehead and struck the stone floor with a sharp *ting*.

I stepped back, my heart racing. I wanted to snap a response, but also knew I had to be careful. This *boy*, whoever he was, was clearly dangerous. I could feel it from his presence alone. He was volatile. One moment, completely fine, then another as angry as a cornered wild animal.

"I grow tired of this game. Where is the autumn stone?" He stepped toward me with each word until my back was against the stone wall, and his breath washed down my face. "We have wandered your castle for hours!"

"I-I don't know. I thought that was it!" I lowered my voice. "We have

searched everywhere I can imagine.”

“That’s unfortunate,” he muttered. He ran his hand down his scruffy face, cold eyes still locked on mine and holding me in place. “Would your brother know?”

I shook my head. “It’s possible, but I don’t even know how to find him. I’d ask my mother or father, but I don’t know which piece of furniture they were turned into.” I was aware of how the edge of my tone had turned sharp, but thankfully it didn’t add to his anger.

The boy looked around the room. “That was an unintended side effect of the enchantment, I’m afraid.”

“Side effect?” I narrowed my eyes. “You mean *you* cast the spell?”

“I enchanted the rose and turned you into a beast,” he confessed. He turned to face me, hands resting on his hips. “Yes, I disguised myself as the old man. All I’d hoped was to distract your family so I could come in and get the stone before being captured. I didn’t intend for the rest to happen.” He threw his arm out in an annoyed gesture.

My lips parted, and I looked him up and down, renewed disgust on my tongue. No wonder I felt something off about him. He possessed more than basic magic, more than the ability to start a fire or create a healing potion. The metallic tang in the air . . . that was him. *His* magic. Disgusting, murderous, threatening magic leeching off his equally disgusting self.

“Don’t hate me so much. I wanted to get in and out before anyone spotted me. Now things are far more complicated.” He backed up, finally giving me space to breathe. “You’ll come with me to find your brother.”

“Why should I help you?” I snarked.

The boy raised his eyebrow. “Because if you don’t, everyone in the castle will remain part of it. What will happen to your kingdom? You’re a beast by day—a magical monster your people so vehemently despise.”

I tightened my lips.

He smirked. “Show me the rose. I’m certain you kept it.”

I stood scowling at him for several long, silent minutes.

His smirk fell, and he met the intensity of my glare.

In honesty, I didn’t know what happened to the rose that night after I’d pricked my thumb. Hopefully, one of the servants hadn’t thrown it out with other decorations that night. Why he even wanted to see it, I didn’t know.

“I think I saw it on the desk of my room when we went in there looking,”

I finally said, though I wasn't positive. I *thought* I had seen the rose, but could only hope it was actually there.

He put one hand behind his back and gestured with the other. "After you. Your Highness."

"Only after you explain what you meant about Keltin."

He raised a brow. "I assume you can walk and speak simultaneously?"

"You are so . . . obnoxious."

He blinked, his expression unchanging.

It was my turn to grumble under my breath as I turned away from him. My eyes scanned for any sort of weapon in case I needed it now that I didn't have teeth and claws to protect me. If I even stood a chance against him, of course.

"What were you going to ask about your brother?"

"Are you implying my brother isn't a piece of furniture?"

"I'm not implying, I'm stating."

My hands tightened into fists. I hated this stranger. "This means you know something you aren't telling." I stopped at the bottom of the winding staircase, blocking his exit, and looked at him.

His prideful smirk returned. "I know many things you don't, Princess."

"When I return to the beast, I'm going to bite off your hand!" I shouted.

"Calm down." He chuckled, raising his hands in a gesture of feigned innocence. "I know where your brother is. And no, he's not a piece of furniture." As if it wasn't bad enough that the hunter I'd been foolish enough to trust was, in fact, the magic-wielding monster who had turned me to a wolf and everyone I knew into inanimate objects, now he stood before me telling me even more lies!

I stepped back, and then as quickly as I could, slammed the heavy wooden door shut and twisted the key in the lock. I lifted my nightgown up enough to give me a better chance at running before sprinting down the next staircase.

What was I thinking?

I'd acted purely out of anger, knowing full well that door wouldn't keep him locked up, but it had felt good to slam the door in his face. He'd mentioned the rose. There was something about the rose he had also kept from me, and if I beat him to it, I might have been able to break my own spell. Perhaps all I had to do was prick my finger again. Was magic that

simple?

I slipped into my room, but I'd broken my door open after first transforming into a wolf, and wasn't able to close it to add a level of safety. My room was so dim I could barely make out the shapes of my bed, chaise chair, and desk. The last of the sun's rays were slipping away, giving the shadows full reign of the night. Relief flooded me when I spotted the rose, and I bolted to my desk. Had one of the servants brought it in? Or had magic put it there?

I snatched up the ruby flower and dug my thumb into the thorn.

Nothing felt different.

Then again, the prick at the autumn ball two nights before also hadn't felt any different. I wouldn't know until the morning.

I heard Hunter's boots scuffing the floor before his silhouette appeared in my doorway.

"Allul," the boy said in a deep voice. The sconces on my bedroom walls ignited, as did the fireplace and candlesticks, banishing the darkness.

I straightened my spine and held up the rose victoriously. "You're too late. I've already pricked my finger again and reversed your imbecilic spell."

A petal broke from the flower and lazily fluttered down, like a leaf giving one last dance in the wind, before it settled on the floor. Once it touched the stone, it disintegrated.

I gasped.

"You should be more careful with that rose."

I looked up from where the petal should have been and saw the young man drawing near.

"When the last petal falls, the enchantment will be permanent."

I shifted my gaze to the rose, my mouth gone dry. My hand, and the rose, trembled. As carefully as possible, I set the rose down upon the desk, then wrapped my arms around myself. "How . . ."

"I created the enchantment. Again, believing only you would be impacted." He looked around the room. Surprisingly, he reached over and opened my closet. He snatched the first dress he spotted and quickly closed the door. "Here. Put this on." He tossed it to me, not caring that it dropped to the floor barely a foot away from him.

I narrowed my eyes. "That dress is completely improper for travel."

He gestured with both hands to my closet. "You may wish to get a travel cloak as well. If you're done with your fit, I'm going to get some food."

"You may want a bath as well," I said when he reached the door. "You stink."

He smirked.

"Why do you lie?"

"Pardon me?" He turned to me again.

"You've lied about everything with me." I walked to my closet and pulled the door open. "You keep hidden that you were, in fact, the one who cast the spell in the first place. Then you tell me Keltin isn't under the spell."

"Hm . . . he's under *a* spell." He inclined his head.

I frowned. "Not to mention your name. Or lack thereof." I raised my brows. "I won't go with you if you won't give me your name, and I demand to know what happened with Keltin."

"Not yet." He shrugged.

"As I said, I will refuse to go with you."

He sighed and put his hand on the frame of the door. "Ismae, you want honesty? Prince Ulrich is out of prison now. He likely stopped by the castle to see what happened, only to find it completely abandoned. Considering he's not here now, it is extremely likely he's already left for Terricina to tell his father about the spell over the castle. He's been learning more and would know enough about magic now to be able to feel it. It's a heavy curse."

"One *you* cast." I chose one of my heavier, less beautiful dresses designed for traveling with different shades of brown fabric in layers and with golden buttons up the back.

The boy shrugged his broad shoulders. "Irrelevant. But if he came back and found a *beast* living in the castle, do you think he'd wait for nightfall before pursuing information? After all, his only sister, friends, *and* lover have been impacted by this spell. I don't think he'd wait around for answers."

"You act as if you know him."

He straightened. "My point is you have a choice. Remain a beast or return to being a princess." He shrugged. "I've learned."

"Learned what?"

"Never mind." He shook his head, then gave me a mocking bow and

gestured. "Shall we, Your Highness?"

I folded my arms. "Not before you give me your name."

He glanced around like he had when entering my room. He ran his tongue over his teeth.

"What are you looking for?" I demanded.

"Shadows. Never trust the shadows," he said flatly before nodding once. "As you wish. My name is Gerard." He put his hand on his chest, his green eyes glittered, and that toying smirk tugged the corner of his mouth.

"What sort of name is that?" I asked with a disgusted tone and wrinkle to my nose. "Some northern . . . Oh, but you are! You're a northerner! From Ashwrya! Of course. I should have seen it when . . . wait a minute." I didn't know how I hadn't seen it before. "You're *Gerard*! Elisa's ex-fiancé."

Gerard's lips tightened into a thin line.

"Oh, she told me all about you!" I snatched a nearby vase and threw it at his head.

He easily dodged it, and the clay shattered on the stone floor. "You best choose your actions carefully," he warned as I reached for a second. "You don't know if that's your great aunt."

I looked at the vase now in my hands. "Sitting on the mantel?" I threw it at him, and again he dodged it. "You aren't getting off so easily. I'm not letting you get near me, you *murderer*."

He flinched, then muttered under his breath, "It was an accident."

"You still killed Elisa's sister. One of my favorite people!" I stormed over to the fireplace and snatched one of the pokers.

"Ismae, you couldn't possibly understand." The tone in his voice had changed. For the first time, it actually *sounded* like he was being honest. "You have no idea why I did that."

"Oh? Then tell me."

He shook his head. "I don't like you or trust you."

"The feeling is mutual." I kept the poker poised.

Gerard ran his hand over his hair, eyes briefly closing. "I'm going to the Weeping Woods, with or without you, and I will acquire that stone and disappear. You will never see me again." Gerard turned and headed for the door. "Whether you choose to join me and save your brother or not is up to you."

"What is Keltin doing there?" I asked.

“I put him there.” He disappeared around the corner.

I wasn't going to leave Keltin to rot in the woods with who knew what monsters, but at the same time, something foreboding gnawed at my belly.

Gerard was dangerous.



NINE

I MADE SURE TO TAKE THE TIME TO BATHE, THOUGH WHEN I RA nearly as warm as I liked. I didn't know how to warm the water, only turn it on in the tub. I scrubbed myself clean, braided my hair back—which proved to be a task around the horns—and checked the wound on my shoulder. Regardless of how I felt about Gerard at that moment, he *had* healed the wound.

I'd managed to get my dress on and button the lower half but couldn't button any further on my own no matter how hard I tried. I set my travel boots and cloak on the pack I'd thrown together for myself so we could leave the next day, then I followed my nose to the kitchens.

Gerard stood in front of the fireplace, scooping chopped carrots, cabbage, onions, and beans from the cutting board and into a pot. He then added a good two handfuls of peas to it. "You could help instead of watching me," he said flatly.

"I need your help with my dress."

He finally looked at me, then looked me up and down.

"I can't do it on my own," I added, flustered. "Please?" I pulled my braid aside and turned my back to him, showing him at least a little bit of trust. He'd already expressed he needed me, so he wasn't going to stab me in the back.

At least, I hoped.

I heard him grumble something and get to his feet. Then his hands brushed my back, making me flinch.

"Do you want me to help or not?"

"Your hands are rough. It caught me by surprise." I looked over my shoulder at him.

Gerard's gaze bored into mine.

"I'm sorry," I added in a mumble. "Please?"

He shook his head and reached up again to button my dress, this time finishing the task. He stepped back when he was done. "I could use some help cutting the meat for dinner."

"I don't know how."

Gerard pointed to a knife. "Take it." He grabbed some meat wrapped in

cloth. “We’re lucky to have this meat. It’s smoked already. Perfect. We won’t get sick from eating it.” He set it on the cutting board and looked at me. His eyes traveled slowly over the shape of my body, then back to my face. “You clean up nicely.”

“Was that a compliment?” I lifted the knife.

“The closest one you’ll get. Come here and I’ll show you how to cut this up. First, you’re holding your knife incorrectly.” He held his hand out toward me.

I hesitated.

His expression didn’t shift. “You won’t be able to act fast enough to hurt me with that puny knife anyway. I’m a trained warrior. You’re a princess.”

“My father taught me how to fight with a sword.”

“Eh, no, he taught you how to show off with a sword. Did he ever have you spar with a soldier?”

“Keltin.”

He nodded. “As I said. Not properly trained.”

I huffed and reluctantly stepped toward him with half a mind to jab the blade up into his ribs, but he caught my wrist before I even moved.

“Your hand goes like this. The hilt of the knife in your palm, fingers on either side of the blade. No, your finger doesn’t go there.” He pushed my index finger off the spine. “Like that. When you cut, you go tip first, then draw the hilt down toward the cutting board. Like this.” He kept his hand over mine, his arm wrapped around me, and guided my hand.

Had he been any other boy, even Mathias, the moment would have been *almost* romantic. Had I not wanted to stab him in the heart, I would have possibly found him irresistible.

“Good. Now try on your own.” Gerard stepped aside.

I glanced sideways at him.

He kept his eyes on mine.

I exhaled heavily through my nose and turned to the task at hand. I wasn’t that bad. In fact, aside from some slices being wider at the top and thinner at the bottom, I didn’t do too poorly.

Gerard scooped the meat into the pot and added a couple of spoonfuls of flour. “There. Now, we just have to wait for the vegetables to cook. You did pretty good your first time.” I caught a hint of something in his eyes when he glanced at me again.

He was guarded.

I'd seen that expression in my own reflection from time to time. I was guarded because no one valued my thoughts or desires anyway, no one cared what I wanted for my future. What was his reason?

I licked my lips and wiped my hands on a towel. "Why did you do this to us?"

"Had I come to you and asked for the stone, would you have handed it over?"

"Of course not. It's the *royal* stone of Arington," I reminded him slowly. "It has been handed down from king to king, showing all in the land our status."

Gerard shrugged. "That is why I cast the spell. Though, my father was correct. Enchanting objects is definitely more difficult than I thought." He shook his head. "The enchantment bled from you into your castle."

"Your father? Is he the one who taught you magic?"

"No." He stirred the contents of the pot. "And before you keep prodding, I won't share anything personal. You may as well give up now."

I folded my arms. "I know all I need to know about you, Prince Gerard. Yes, I remember you being introduced at Elisa's birthday celebration. I remember your grandmother. I also remember how you *pretended* to care for Elisa only to kill her sister and attack her land. All because, what? You couldn't have her throne?"

His jaw flexed. "I didn't care for her throne. Will you please stop?"

"I'll keep talking if you won't share anything with me. Perhaps you can tell me how you summoned a dragon into our world?" I walked closer and closer to him. "Elisa told me all about your magic. Dark magic. Even worse than what we've outlawed in Arington. *You* are the reason why we don't allow magic. Because people like you shouldn't have any power."

He moved so quickly, I only had time to gasp. Gerard placed his hand in the middle of my chest and drove me backward until I hit the wall. "If you want to keep your tongue, I suggest you close your mouth. Don't speak of things you know nothing about. You live in your castle, living your perfect life, having everything you could dream of handed to you on gold and silver platters. You think, merely because you were *born* into royalty, you are better than anyone around you. The enchantment I placed upon you? Do you know why it works?"

I trembled under his blazing eyes.

“Do not be deceived by looks alone, or the truth of your heart will be shone. A prick of the finger, the spell will linger, until the last petal falls. Inner thoughts reflected on your face, may the gods grant you some grace. Only through love, like an innocent dove, will the spell stall. Those are the words of the enchantment.”

The words echoed as he spoke, making my chest ache so hard I couldn't breathe.

Gerard stepped back. “You did this to yourself. Those horns on your head, the beastly form by day, that is what you are inside. The only way it can be broken is if you learn to love someone other than yourself.” He spun away.

I reached up and touched the horns and softly bit my trembling bottom lip.

This was my fault?

I leaned against the counter, my appetite gone. The silence between us was just as tangible as the silence of the castle. All I wanted was for all of this to be done but mostly for Gerard to leave.

Gerard glanced at me more than once while he cooked the food. Eventually, he got to his feet and leaned against the counter near me.

I'd had plenty of time for some silent self-reflection. Enough to decide I might have been a little short-tempered, maybe too impulsive, and yes, what I'd done to Ulrich was cruel. I was not, however, a beast. No matter what the murdering scum beside me claimed.

“How are we going to find my brother?” I finally asked, breaking the silence between us.

He shrugged. “I imagine some creature in the forest will know where he is.”

“Why wouldn't he come out? Come back home?”

Gerard looked away from the fire. “Well. Because I turned him into a troll. Crown prince or not, if he showed his face as a troll, not one person would believe when he claimed to be their prince. Adding you running about as a beast, and the people in your land will soon believe there's a break in the barrier you had created to keep the magical beasts out.” He shrugged. “Foolish, if you ask me.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Because all you’ve done is trap those few in your land and cause them to grow a deep hatred toward you and everyone in your kingdom. Every other kingdom nearby allows magical creatures into their land. And they use magic in everything they do. Why does Arington hate it so?”

I raised my brow. “You would too if you only had negative experiences with it.”

His lips tightened. “You’ve no idea.”

“Oh? Do share.” I folded my arms and popped my hip.

He shook his head. “I already said—”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes. “You refuse to tell me anything.”

“Back to why you hate magic?”

“If I tell you, you must tell me something in return.”

He frowned.

“It’s only fair.” I fluttered my eyelashes at him.

He inclined his head but finally nodded once. “If that helps.”

I rubbed my hands together. “My father, and many of the elders, tell children about the Witch of the Woods who used to steal children and eat them.”

“Eat them?” Gerard lifted both eyebrows. “How could you possibly know she was eating them?”

“They were never seen again.” I put my palms together. “Of course, there were stories of men who desperately chased after her to rescue their children, but she would use dark magic to thwart their journey, throwing up walls of thorns, even creating a swamp within the Weeping Woods.” As I spoke, my hand movements became more animated. “They even tell how they found the bones of children at the edge of the woods as she taunted the families.”

“That’s . . . disgusting,” Gerard responded with a scowl. “Couldn’t your father get help?”

“He tried, but none of the magical creatures in our land were willing to help. Father sent out decrees demanding they meet, but no one could come to an agreement on how to help.”

“Wasn’t anyone saved?”

I smiled softly. “My father saved me.”

His brow twitched, and he looked me up and down. “You’re telling me you weren’t born a princess?”

"I didn't say that. I just said I'm the only one I know of who was saved."

He grunted. "The witch was brazen enough to steal the princess?"

I nodded.

"What did she do with all of that power?"

"I don't know. There was a curfew in the land for a long time. No one went out at night, windows were boarded, everything. Of course, I don't remember any of it, but Keltin tells me how scared he was."

"What I don't understand is how this witch couldn't break the barrier if she was using blood sacrifice for her magic," Gerard muttered to himself. He folded his arms and crossed his ankles, staring down into the fire.

To think, only a few months ago I thought he was the perfect prospect to wed Elisa, my very best friend in the entire world. Now, I was stuck with him until he helped me break the enchantment *he* placed on my castle.

"You hate me, and you don't even know me," he suddenly said, breaking the silence.

"Pardon me?"

Gerard turned his head to look at me. "I can feel how much you hate me."

I arched my brow. "Can you blame me?"

He let out a breath that was nearly a snort, then shrugged off the counter and started digging through cupboards. "Where are your bowls?"

"I don't know."

"You live here."

I gestured to myself. "Princess."

"And *that* attitude is what makes you beastly."

I balled my hands into fists. "I was raised a princess. Because of that, I've barely set foot in the kitchen. We have servants for a reason. Why would I possibly know where the bowls are?"

"You never come and help?"

"Why should I?" I folded my arms. "I spend all day doing my studies."

Gerard laughed. "Studies? What do you possibly have to study for? How to walk in a gown? Perhaps how to speak incessantly to annoy any potential suitors? How to annoy them to the point they choose a male companion over you?"

His words struck my heart like shards of ice, and I turned away from him. "I'm going to bed."

I heard him let out a loud exhale and visualized him running his hand

over his face. "Ismae, you need to eat."

"I'm not hungry," I said as I headed down the hallway. Although I was positively famished, I was done being around him. He knew what to say to hurt me, and he'd stepped over the line.

My heart sat in my stomach like a heavy stone.

If Keltin truly was in the Weeping Woods, I could get a head start. I could take a horse from the stables and run all night. Then I wouldn't have to deal with Gerard the entire journey.

I stopped at the bottom of the staircase, my hand on the stone railing. I already had a small pack with blankets ready. I wouldn't have a chance to get food for the journey, but I could deal with it later. Only, the back entrance of the castle was beside the kitchen, and I would have to be completely silent if I didn't want to alert Gerard of my escape.

I ran up the stairs to my room to collect my supplies, put the pack over my shoulders, and crept back down the hall I'd just come from, keeping my eyes focused on the doorway of the kitchen as I neared. Gerard's shoulder came into view first, then back. I was relieved to see his back to me. He stirred the contents of the pot, eventually pouring the spoonful into a bowl he'd found. A second sat on the counter, steaming. Maybe he felt bad for what he'd said to me and wasn't so hungry anymore either, because he stared at the food instead of standing to eat.

I didn't care.

If I deserved to be a beast as he claimed, he deserved what little guilt I could make him feel.

I slid past the open doorway, got outside, and ran as fast as I could out to the stables. Which were, of course, pitch black. I'd been in the stables before and knew where the stable hands kept the saddles and hung the bridles, but everything looked far more threatening in the dark, and Gerard's warning about the shadows made my hair rise.

I stared into the daunting darkness. Slivers of light pierced the darkness through gaps in the wooden ceiling. Lucky for me, it was nearly a full moon outside and the sky was cloudless.

Swallowing my fear and apprehension, I marched to the first stall on my right—the one easiest to see. The horse was massive. It seemed bigger than horses usually did. He must have been a cart horse. To make matters only worse, as soon as I drew near, the horse snorted and stomped its foot.

“Relax. It’s just me. The princess.” I held my hands up as if the horse would understand they were empty and I offered no threat.

The horse backed up and let out a loud whinny before kicking its back legs against the wooden side of the barn.

“Shh! Shh, stop!” I begged. “Don’t let Gerard know!”

I put my hands on the gate separating me from the horse, but it only screamed and threw a bigger tantrum, throwing its head side to side.

“It can smell the predator side of you,” Gerard’s unwelcome voice said behind me.

I lifted my shoulders to my ears and let out a little growl.

“I have to admit, even for you, this is brave. Trying to saddle a horse?” He appeared at my side. “You didn’t even know where the bowls were in your castle. What made you think you could do this?”

“I was desperate. Wasn’t it *you* who said something about people being able to do things when they got pushed hard enough?”

He turned his face to me, leaning his arm on top of the gate. “I recommend you eat dinner and get some rest so we can leave first thing in the morning.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer for me to travel across my land as the princess I am instead of as a beast everyone is hunting?” I folded my arms.

He shrugged a shoulder. “Yes, but I’m not a bat. I prefer to travel during the day. I believe you are both hungry and tired, and therefore grumpy.”

I didn’t have the energy to snap back at him. I had resigned myself to the fact he was right, at least at that moment. As much as I wanted to prove him wrong and take the horse and run, we both knew I’d never get the saddle on, even if I had a full night’s sleep and dinner.

I turned and walked out of the barn.

“What, no snide remarks?” Gerard feigned a gasp.

“Do you need a medal for being correct for once?” I opened the back door and slammed it shut before Gerard could get in, then flipped the lock. He could sleep out in the barn for all I cared.

“You need to eat!” he called.

“I’m not hungry!” I shouted back.

“Then go ahead and starve!”



TEN

I DIDN'T WANT TO WAKE THE NEXT MORNING.

I'd had a lovely dream that I woke to find the tables set for the morning feast for the first day of autumn. Arington was the only one of the four kingdoms to celebrate our dinner feast the night before the actual change of seasons. The next day, the true first day of autumn, was always filled with the breakfast feast, then midday feast with dancing, music, and a massive kite contest to see who built the most beautiful, best flying, most colorful, simplest, smallest, and so forth. Markets were full of baked goods, fine clothing made of yellows, oranges, reds, and browns. Children ran about playing games. It was my favorite day of the year.

This was supposed to be my first year judging the kite contest.

It was to be my one new responsibility not correlated with being someone's wife.

But when I woke, the bright afternoon sun in my dream faded away. Keltin's laughter as he danced with Ulrich, the bright music, all of it disappeared as my eyes opened. It was funny how the one day of the year I actually mingled with the townspeople, I hadn't had the opportunity, and it was the one thing I longed for at that moment.

What were the villagers thinking? What had they done when no one from the castle left that day? I'd been walking in a forest with a killer and hadn't even bothered to wonder what chaos must have erupted in Avare.

Gerard pounded his fist on the doorframe, breaking the silence. "Time to get up. It's nearly dawn, and you need to dress before you return to your wolf form. I'll get breakfast ready, and then we need to leave."

"Why are you in such a rush?" I grumbled. I sat up and ran my fingers through my ratty hair.

He stared at me. "Didn't you hear what I just said?"

I stretched with a groan and rubbed my cheek. "Yes. Did you sleep at all? Ever?"

He didn't move, but his gaze darted to the window. "Not right now. If I am to be honest, perhaps I'm a tad worried the villagers will see your candlelight and firelight and come in."

I let my head drop to one shoulder. "I don't think that would be so bad.

They would see me, their princess, and if I transformed, they would realize the truth. That I am their princess and they nearly killed me.”

“Oh, yes.” He nodded but folded his arms across his chest. “And begin to speculate you’ve always been a beast, which is why you never cared to visit them ever as your brother did.”

Again, he was right. I pressed my lips together tightly.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry it came to this.” Gerard nonchalantly gestured a hand toward me.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t even pretend to be sorry.”

He shrugged and walked away.

I combed through my long brown hair, looked over my face, eyes, nose, freckles, brows, and horns. I took in every detail, including those I’d once seen as flaws, such as the tiny scar on my forehead over my left eye from Mathias threw a rock and it hit me on the head when we were children. Each detail was mine. And who knew when I would see it again?

I removed my nightgown and looked at the vibrant pink scar on my shoulder from the wound Gerard had stitched up. It looked surprisingly good and only ached when I moved certain directions, like putting on my dress.

He had breakfast ready when I arrived on the main level—grilled and seasoned potatoes, eggs, and various meats—and he sat at the dining table instead of eating in the kitchen.

I glanced at the windows, at the pink starting to spread across the bellies of the clouds. My heart sunk, and I hurried to the table. Maybe I could at least eat this meal as a human before turning back into the beast.

“Need help with the buttons again?” Gerard asked casually.

“Yes. Please.” I turned to him so he could button it before I sat down in my spot at the table.

Gerard sat in my father’s seat, which made me want to stab his hand with my fork. He smeared a gob of honey on a croissant, set it on a small plate, and pushed it to me. “It really bothers you, the transformation.”

“It’s humiliating,” I confirmed. I didn’t touch the croissant. I didn’t know if he’d poisoned it or something else. “You said you could release me from the spell.”

“And I can, but I need the autumn stone.”

“I don’t believe you!” I shouted, gripping my fork and knife so tightly my

knuckles turned white. “I hate that you’ve taken everyone from me, forced me to walk around like an *animal*, and treat me even less than an animal!”

Gerard leaned back in his seat. “You wish to argue with what little time you have left before you return to being that animal?”

“I wish to let you know how much I hate you before I’m forced into silence the rest of the day.” I glared down at my food and angrily stabbed at a potato. “You’re no better than any other man I’ve met, forcing women into silence.”

He rolled his eyes. “Trust me, that wasn’t my intention. I already told you, all I wanted was to create a distraction.”

“Just know I am only going with you so I can save Keltin because I don’t trust you to go alone. You’d likely find him, torture him until he told you the location of the autumn stone, then return and kill me.” I shoved a mouthful of food into my face, not caring whether I looked like a princess.

Gerard tilted his chin down, which made his green eyes take on a cold glint. “If I wanted you dead, what is to stop me from killing you now? And if I wanted to torture Keltin, what is to keep me from doing that with you there? You have absolutely no ability to defeat me, regardless of timing.”

My utensils suddenly dropped from my hands as they changed into paws. Tears stung my eyes. I was starving, and all I wanted was to eat my breakfast. I turned my face away and climbed out of the chair, only to fall on all fours as the transformation took hold.

I stood silent, looking down at the rug beneath the dining table. I’d never taken the time to look at it. It was a beautiful deep green with reds, oranges, yellows, and golds blended throughout to create a floor of leaves. As soon as Gerard was finished eating, we would be traveling through real leaves, leaving the castle I knew behind once more.

I heard something touch the floor and looked over my shoulder to see Gerard stepping back after he’d placed my plate beside me.

“You need to finish eating.” He carried his empty plate away.

I was grateful he wasn’t there to observe my humiliation. I scarfed down the rest of my food and grabbed the pack I’d left by the doorway to carry in my teeth.

We left by the way of the secret entrance at the back of the castle and then turned east to avoid the town of Avare and the people therein. The main road through Arington wound from Avare, around Tost, Filone, Bertold, and

Chorse, before ending at Cornesh.

“I’ll take a horse to help carry the supplies. I think we would save a lot of time if we stayed away from the main towns. According to your map, Avare will be easy to avoid. We can stay near the Mandon Forest, cross that river, and even get around Filone without being spotted.”

I followed him to the stables as he spoke, then watched as he got the saddle and bridle on one of the smaller horses. It seemed far calmer than the horse I had attempted to steal the night before.

Still, we had to travel past Filone at some point *and* make our way around the scattered farms that didn’t belong to a particular town. Then we would reach Cornesh and the Weeping Woods beyond. I wasn’t excited to pass Cornesh. I’d heard stories of it being haunted.

Gerard glanced down at me from his saddle.

I hadn’t been paying attention as we walked through the familiar forest, aside from all the noise I’d never noticed while riding. I didn’t return his look. I was still mad, and there was no way to yell at him until that night.

I did, however, have *lots* of time to think.

Ulrich hadn’t been in the castle. He hadn’t been affected by the enchantment. How long would it take Ulrich to get back with help? If I could keep Gerard distracted long enough once we arrived back at the castle, Ulrich’s soldiers could arrest him. Hopefully Ulrich had realized why a mysterious beast had shown up at the prison to get his attention.

More than once, Gerard had to stop the horse, his keen hunter ears focusing on men’s voices in the distance or the sound of an axe striking wood. He would motion for me to go down a game trail and head further into the forest so we could make our way around the unseen men.

Once, however, we came to a meadow and Gerard quickly, and harshly, whispered, “Down!”

I dropped to my belly.

“Morning!” a man’s voice called.

Gerard raised a hand and smiled. “Good morning to you as well. What traps are you laying out?”

“Ah, beaver. There’s a lovely slow branch of the river through here. I would appreciate it if you didn’t share the location with anyone.”

“No worries. I’m only passing through. Prince Ulrich sent me to keep an eye on things until he returns,” Gerard motioned his hand as if he wanted

me to crawl ahead.

“Word spread quickly yesterday and the day before. He told the men of Avare to be on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary.” Water splashed, and although I couldn’t see, I figured the man was likely setting up another trap.

“Good advice,” Gerard nudged his horse. “Good luck with your traps.”

I peered through the tall weeds as the man raised his hand in a short wave to Gerard. Slowly, carefully, I got to my feet and tiptoed after Gerard.

When we were far enough away, Gerard chuckled. “You don’t need to walk so slow. You’ve got a natural ability to sneak with those massive paws.”

Like you would know, I thought to myself.

We traveled through the Mandon Forest the entire day and reached the western edge by lunch.

I heard the river before I smelled it.

The Troll River.

As Gerard had anticipated, we’d avoided most of the towns and people. However, we were also further west than the main road and at a part of the river that had no bridge.

I promptly sat away from the tall reeds and looked across the river at the little town that must have been Filone.

Gerard rolled up his sleeves and trudged through the thick cattail reeds and peered down the bank into the muddy waters. “Hm.” His gaze darted back and forth, then lifted to the opposite bank. He turned to me. “Think we can swim across?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t think so.” He looked back at the water, then up- and downstream. “Our options appear to be head back upstream”—he pointed—“and get to the main bridge or see what our options are further downstream.”

I knew if we carried on downstream, the river would direct us away from our destination, which meant we would lose precious time. Not only that, but the river cut through the southern tip of the Drakespine Mountains and into Griswil. I had no idea if there was even a bridge that direction to cross. Yet, at the same time, heading a little ways upstream meant getting near Filone and Tost. If we were forced to take that main bridge, we would also

pass Bertold.

This meant Gerard's idea to save time was already a failed plan.

"I was asking for your opinion," Gerard said. "But I think we should try further downstream. Unless you desire to be captured before we reach Keltin?"

If wolves could frown, then I was.

He nodded and motioned me to follow. "It's settled. Come." He took the reins of the horse and walked on foot alongside the river. "Once we get to the other side, we will eat."

How could this boy go so long without eating *or* sleeping? Begrudgingly, I got to my feet and followed after him.

"You could get a drink from the river while we're near if you'd like. Drinking from a river is far safer than anywhere else because the water is constantly moving and bugs don't have time to lay their eggs before they're swept off."

For a moment, I was grateful to be a wolf so Gerard couldn't see the disgust on my face and make fun of me for it. I looked over at the river and saw the small ripples of water bumping against the reeds growing in the water.

Pausing, I lowered my front paws in the mud and get a drink. The cool water tasted incredible, especially after walking for so long. The sun was well past midday, or so it appeared. Then again, I very well could have been facing the wrong direction. I oriented myself to confirm the sun was, in fact, past noon.

Gerard had continued on without me while I drank. "There's a bridge!" he called, gesturing proudly with both hands.

I caught up with him to see for myself.

"See? I told you this was a better idea."

I, however, didn't like the look of what *he* called a bridge.

Three sets of supporting posts had been plunged into the river, and both those and the planks running the length appeared water-worn and were covered in deep-green and brown fuzzy plants. It clearly hadn't been used in ages.

I tilted my head to give him a look, hoping he read "you honestly expect me to cross that?" but instead, he only reached down and patted me on the head.

“I’ll go first.” He patted the horse’s neck and left it behind, shouldered the pack, and started across the ancient wooden planks.

I walked to the overgrown path leading to the bridge. *Go ahead. That bridge won’t hold your weight. When you fall through, I’ll just watch and hope you make it safely out of the river when you get to Griswil. I believe Elisa banished you, and when you show your face there, the people of Griswil will demand revenge. You’ll have no choice than to free me of my enchantment, and Arington will keep possession of the autumn stone. I couldn’t have planned this any better.*

Gerard, however, couldn’t hear my thoughts. He walked confidently up the slope of the bridge until he reached the part where it was *supposed to* level off. Instead, it tilted at an uncomfortable angle.

“One of the posts appears splintered.” Gerard held his hands out to either side to help him balance while testing the support of the planks. The fourth one protested loudly, and he quickly moved his foot. He glanced over his shoulder at me. “I hope you’re paying attention to where I’m stepping. You weigh a lot more than I do. And no, that isn’t a statement about your true size but your beast one,” he finished quickly before I had a chance to growl at him.

He stepped over the fourth plank and carried on, gaining more confidence the nearer he drew to the middle of the bridge.

“I must admit,” he said over the roar of the water, “this bridge was built very securely. Even after years of neglect, it still stands strong.” He stepped over a board covered in vegetation.

And watch. Because you said that, the bridge is going to break.

The board beside it snapped, and Gerard’s leg dropped through the gap. He grunted when his ribs hit the bridge, taking the breath from him. I heard the bridge groan at the sudden movement and stared in absolute shock.

I’d heard of something called “the power of suggestion,” where people had this crazy superstition that merely by speaking, something could happen. It’s also why people in Arington tapped their knuckles on anything made of wood—to counteract when they said something negative.

I was neither superstitious enough to tap wood nor believe my words alone caused something to happen. It was just horribly coincidental.

Gerard drew a deep breath and carefully looked over his shoulder at me. “Don’t move.”

I hadn't realized I'd taken steps onto the bridge on instinct to help him. I looked down at my feet.

"The bridge won't hold both of us. Let—" He hissed in pain as he tried to lift himself. "Let me get up first."

He put all his weight on his right knee, which was still up on the bridge, but when he shifted all his weight to that leg, the board cracked and dropped him. Gerard dangled by his arms, clutching at the small gaps between the wooden planks. If he died, my enchantment would last forever, and who knew what would happen to my friends and family stuck in the castle?

My hope for him being captured in Griswil was as foolish as any of my other thoughts.

Ignoring his warning to stay back, I headed out onto the aging bridge. As Gerard predicted, it objected to my weight. But I was smarter than Gerard gave me credit for. Instead of placing my weight on the center of the planks, I spread my legs, distributing my weight on the outside edges of the bridge, where the planks had been nailed to supporting beams running perpendicular to the river.

I licked my snout in a nervous gesture as I made my way to him.

He cried out. He had slipped down further. His right hand clung to the bridge, but he couldn't get a grip with his left.

Gerard was just past the halfway mark of the bridge, and if I ran for it, I could possibly grab him by his pack and make it to safety before the bridge collapsed. Or my sudden movement would cause what little strength remained in the bridge to give out and drop us both into the river.

I wasn't going to let him die. I needed to be a princess again.

With determination, I sprinted as fast as I could. As I grabbed Gerard's pack with my teeth, the weight suddenly disappeared. The bag easily flung free, and I heard a splash. I looked down at the swift river in time to see Gerard's head bob to the surface.



ELEVEN

“I MAY HAVE BROKEN MY LEG!” GERARD CALLED TO ME.

I’d dropped his bag and run after him, sprinting along the shore while he appeared to be swimming with the current. What was he doing? Trying to get down the river faster?

Having spotted the large stones ahead, I barked at him.

He turned himself in the water and swam toward me. But the water sucked him right against one of the large boulders. He grunted when he struck it, but somehow spun with the water and slid with a current I didn’t understand. Finally, he managed to get himself over to the riverbank.

I ran down and bit his arm to help drag him out.

“Ow, ow, ow!” he gasped. “Let go!”

Confused with the rush of adrenaline, I plucked him out of the water, then plopped him down. I shouldn’t have cared, but a massive sense of relief that he was still alive washed over me.

His face was lined in pain, teeth gritted. “That arm . . . the shoulder is dislocated. I’ll need your help setting it.”

I grabbed him by the back of his shirt and hoisted him, rather successfully I might add, further up the bank where I set him down again. Now he was out of the reeds, I could get a proper look at him. His shoulder drooped unnaturally—very clearly out of position.

“Mm. Okay.” He swallowed hard and rolled to his back to look up at the sky before closing his eyes. “Shoulder first. You’ll need to take my wrist in your teeth, try not to puncture the skin, and pull slowly. Don’t jerk my arm. Just . . . nice and slow pressure until you feel it fit back in.”

Gerard was giving me permission to inflict pain.

I didn’t even hesitate. I grabbed his wrist with my teeth and watched him as I started to pull.

He gave a muffled cry, biting his bottom lip, but finally the bone in his shoulder slid it back into place. He lay there for a long time, taking slow breaths, his brows furrowed in pain.

Eventually, the creases on his face softened, and he forced himself to sit up.

I leaned my head close to him. He was pale. I didn’t care about him, not

one bit, but if he couldn't help me, I was stuck. At least, that's how I justified being so close to him.

"Now for my leg." He licked his lips.

I turned my attention to Gerard's bloodied pantleg. I suddenly wished it was evening so I could use my hands to help him. All I could do was lean my nose down and nuzzle his boot, indicating we needed to get that taken care of too.

"I suppose I . . . need to see . . . the damage." He gasped and bit down on his bottom lip. He took the dagger from his boot and cut the pant leg up, revealing the damage to his leg. Not only was it shredded from falling through the wood but a bone stuck out at his shin. He hissed through his teeth. "Yeah. Broken." He closed his eyes, but he couldn't stop his face from twisting in a grimace of pain. He clutched his knee with both hands.

The pack. He would need medicine or bandages, but I'd dropped it a ways back. I jumped to my feet and ran off.

"Wait! Where are you going?" he shouted.

The distance had felt much farther running after Gerard than it did running back to the pack. Watching him struggle in the river had felt like an eternity, while in reality, he'd only floated down the river a couple of minutes.

I scooped up the pack and ran back down the trail to him.

I set it on the ground and nudged it toward him with my nose.

"What are you . . . oh." He swallowed. "The potion."

I tried to dig my nose into the pockets of the pack.

"The pocket—" He took a slow breath in through his nose. "The pocket on the outside." He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut.

I rubbed my head against his shoulder—the only thing I could do to comfort him. I finally got my nose into the pocket enough to get the tiny, invaluable vial of healing liquid. Carefully, I lifted it with my teeth and held it out to him.

He looked up at the sky. "We still have hours before the sun sets. You're completely useless to me as a beast, you know." He gave me a pained smile.

I cocked my head to the side, a bit more dramatically than normal.

"I know, I know. I only have myself to blame. Though, it is wonderful you haven't pestered me all day demanding answers or yelling at me." Again, he offered me that weak smile. He swallowed and looked around.

“The horse . . . too bad he’s on the other side of the river. That vial only has enough in it for one big healing. Either I use it now or save it for something worse.”

What worse thing could possibly happen? I thought.

“Be grateful you didn’t have to taste this. Tastes like garlic and flowers.” He clutched the cork with bloodied fingers, which made it difficult for him to get a good grip. “This isn’t good. Shock is setting in. I’m nauseous and —” He leaned sideways and looked at me desperately before his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell onto his side.

I didn’t know much about “shock,” but it clearly wasn’t good. I stared at him, feeling surprisingly helpless. From what I knew, shock was when the body panicked about being injured and just shut down. In extreme cases of injury, and in the case of Gerard, the injury could even cause someone to faint.

Gerard was in an unconscious heap, bleeding, and suffering from this “shock” he’d mentioned. It took me a moment to remember where I’d heard that term before. It was one time when Elisa had joined Keltin and I on one of Ulrich’s short summer voyages, the ones he went on just with friends so he could practice being a captain himself. Of course, under the watchful eye of an experienced mariner. One of the crew had his hand snagged in a rope that had been released to lower the sail, and his hand got broken. He’d paled just like Gerard, even vomited before collapsing. Ulrich had propped his feet up, gotten him medicine, and managed to bring him back around.

Propping up Gerard’s broken leg didn’t seem like a good idea to me.

I looked up at the Drakespine Mountains, then north to the Weeping Woods. Just looking at it made me uncomfortable. Of course, I’d seen them from about the same distance, but the path to Griswil was through the Mandon Forest, so I very rarely got a glimpse of them.

If I ran on my own, I could make it to the border by nightfall and enter the forest in my real form. Then, whomever I came across would know I was the princess, and Keltin would recognize me.

But I would have to leave Gerard behind, and I sort of needed him to break Keltin’s spell. I had every reason to hate him. As I looked down at Gerard, I remembered what Elisa had told me when I demanded to know why she’d let him go months before.

“Because he was born in darkness, and someone needed to show him the

light.”

She claimed she didn’t know what it meant, only that some mystical dragon had told her. Again, magic. I didn’t understand how she had a vision of a dragon no one had seen in ages, but I was just a puny human with no unique abilities, save the title of princess.

In spite of how much I didn’t like him, there were parts of him I didn’t mind. At least he was willing to help me break the enchantment he’d given me. He’d healed my wound, cooked every meal, and for the most part, he really only complained when I was the one being obnoxious.

Why I felt the need to help Gerard at that moment, I’d never understand.

I couldn’t leave him there. Even knowing I could make it to the forest on my own. Even if Gerard would have left me to die so he could get the royal stone. I was still the princess of Arington and needed to fulfill my responsibility and do what a princess should do.

I lay down in front of him and scooted on my side until my back was against him. As carefully as I could, I grabbed his left wrist in my teeth and pulled while rolling back to my belly, dragging Gerard with me.

It seemed like a good idea in my head, but he was heavier than I thought and trying to pull him onto my back was like trying to hold a dress on your arm without the weight causing it to slide off.

I tried rolling a little faster the second time, and pulling a bit harder the third time, until the fourth time when I combined the two movements and finally got Gerard loaded up on my back. Of course, the added pressure of my teeth dug into his arm and I tasted his blood. Hopefully the bite wound wasn’t too bad. And when he woke up, it would heal when he took the potion anyway.

Thankfully I wasn’t trying to get him on the horse. Unconscious, he was worse than a sack of potatoes! Not that I’d ever carried a sack of potatoes.

Walking was just as complicated. I had to keep his pack in my mouth while trying to keep Gerard balanced. I didn’t understand how horses could keep people on their backs. Even with my added strength in the giant wolf form, I felt that if I moved too suddenly Gerard would slide right off.

In spite of the afternoon sun beating down on us, Gerard was trembling. I needed to get him somewhere fast. I remembered being taught by my father that if you ever fall into water, you’re supposed to remove all your clothing and dry out, I just couldn’t remember if that rule only applied when it was

winter or not.

The edge of the woods seemed to be getting farther away. I wished we had gone eastward and through the Darning Forest into the Weeping Woods. We would have been less exposed and Gerard wouldn't have broken his leg.

We were somewhere in open farming country, past Filone, and I was trying to go as quickly as possible without dropping Gerard.

I had my eyes on a small cluster of trees, and when we drew nearer, I was relieved to spot a small farmhouse and a wide barn beside it. Judging by the broken fence and ivy growing up the side of the house, neither appeared to be in use, but just to be careful I approached the barn first. I sniffed the air, still getting used to my new wolfish senses. The air smelled stale, old.

Being around Gerard, and having passed a few men, I had begun to learn people smelled of sweat, dirt, and salt plus an additional defining scent. Gerard smelled like old leaves and burning sage, and there was something about that scent, something that told me his mind was full of dark memories.

I made my way to the house and sniffed the air again just to be sure. The house smelled musty like moss and things that grew in the water by the river, but I didn't smell people. I pushed the door ajar with my nose and peered inside.

In spite of it being abandoned, the house was still standing proudly. There wasn't a hole in the roof, the windows were boarded up but not broken, and the fireplace hadn't crumbled. It was the perfect spot to rest for the night and take care of Gerard.

Carefully, I lowered to my belly and let Gerard slide off in a heap. He was still trembling, little shudders with random bursts of longer ones. His shirt was almost completely dry, but still, I grabbed it with my teeth and pried it off his limp body. It was harder than it sounds. I struggled to get his arms out—and head without smashing it on the floor.

Finally, his shirt was off, revealing to me a now bruised shoulder and . . . extremely fine body. I knew he was a bad guy, but still. His abs were tightly muscled, his pecs, his arms—everything was perfect. I'd never been more grateful to be a beast. If he opened his eyes and saw me staring, he wouldn't see my blush.

I hadn't anticipated seeing the tattoos, but more unexpectedly than those

were the scars. He had four white scars on his right shoulder, like claw marks, thick and distinct, then scars of varying lengths and sizes on his torso. Keltin had been through sparring matches and been hurt, father had been through battles and been scarred, but I had never seen anyone's body as horribly scarred as Gerard's. My admiration of his muscles immediately shifted to pity. I'd wondered why he was so reserved, so untrusting. It appeared I had part of an answer.

Not wanting to leave Gerard's side, but having no choice, I stepped out of the house to try and find some logs or dry wood so Gerard could start a fire when he woke. He needed warmth, and I couldn't start a fire, but at least I could help one way.

Lucky for me, there was a whole pile of wood leaning against the side of the house. Wood, I quickly learned, doesn't taste good, and bark prickles when you bite it. I carried the logs in one at a time and set five in the fireplace before I lay down against Gerard's side and kept my eyes focused on the open door just in case.

I was *not* snuggling him.

But his trembling stopped.



TWELVE

“WHERE ARE WE?” GERARD GRUMBLED, HIS EYES STRUGGLING

I looked up at the fading sunlight, wishing it would hurry and set so I could return to my human self and actually help. All I could do was sit and watch him toil to come to. I was *not* going to lick him awake.

Gerard finally got his eyes open. “That was unexpected,” he muttered. He ran his hand over his face and pushed himself up to his elbow. He slowly looked around. “An abandoned house? You came into a room with cobwebs and dust intentionally?” He sounded positively exhausted but managed to give me a weary smile.

I flashed my teeth at him.

The corner of his lip tugged a little higher. “I need to get that vial.”

I felt tingling in my extremities—a feeling I’d come to recognize as the cue I was going to return to being a human. I smiled and looked down at myself as the fur slowly dissipated from my body and transformed from wolf paws to hands, long legs to arms, and finally I was sitting in my gown across from Gerard.

“About time.” I gave a perturbed sigh and got to my hands and knees to grab Gerard’s pack. “You have no idea how frustrating it was to drag you here and watch you. I couldn’t help at all. I couldn’t get water to clean your wounds or try and start a fire, not that it would have helped at all because I likely would have set the house on fire, and then I would have had to rescue you again from that.”

After searching his pack and finding the vial, I twisted the cork off and held it out to Gerard.

He stared up at me.

“What?”

“Is it just me, or are you actually starting to care?” Gerard took the vial while giving me a smile.

“Ha ha.” I got up, wiping the dirt from my knees.

“Best watch out or you might make friends with people.” He nodded his head and then downed the liquid. He instantly made a face, closing one eye. He coughed and held his hand out. “Water pouch.”

I opened it before handing it to him. “Sometimes I think I only have

friends because I'm a princess and it's required. Don't tell Elisa." I cleared my throat. "I should get some water and help get your leg cleaned. I saw a bucket by the door and saw a well while I was dragging you here. I'll be right back."

"Are you sure you—"

"Gerard." I raised my brows. "You can't both want me to help and get mad at me when I do."

"True."

"Just lay down. It's only water. It isn't like there's a monster in the well. What's the worst that could happen?"

I snatched the bucket and carefully looked left and right before leaving the house. When I had almost reached the gaping stone mouth of the well, I could have sworn I saw purple hands clinging to the side. I quickly squeezed my eyes shut.

"There is no monster in the well. There can't be. It was just my imagination. When I open my eyes, there will be no monster."

I peeked one eye open, and the hands were gone.

I breathed in relief and hurried over to the well with the bucket. There was a rope and pulley system, and in spite of my lack of ever having drawn water from a well, I was at least smart enough to know to tie the bucket to the rope before dropping it in. Gerard would have to admit I did well.

The sky was stunning. The sun had already disappeared, obviously, and was a brilliant shade of blue, purple, and dark pink. The Drakespine Mountains glowed with a pale blue hue, and the icy caps glistened. Elisa should be flying around those mountains, not stuck in *my* castle.

When I got back to the house, Gerard already had a fire going and had cut the leg of his pants further, up to the knee, revealing the extent of his broken leg. His shin bone stuck out from the flesh to the outside of his leg, and his leg was covered in blood. He was fishing out the medical supplies.

"You know, if you wanted me to remove my clothing, all you had to do was ask," Gerard greeted.

I poured the water into the pot, hiding my blush as I did. Then I set the pot on the fire. "How do I help?"

"That water needs to be clean first."

"Wouldn't your healing potion counteract any infection?"

He lifted his gaze, his brows pinched. "I . . . suppose. I can't think

properly. It hurts.” He hissed through his teeth.

I gasped. “It hurts you to think?” It was my turn for some amusement.

Gerard, however, only gave me a blank expression.

“Do you need to get it back in place before it heals all the way?”

“Are you saying you can help with that?” He eyed me skeptically.

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. But a healer may be able to help. I imagine someone would know where to find one. I could run to Filone or try and find a farmhouse nearby.”

Gerard nodded and held his hand out to the flames. Without a word, the flames grew a little higher and changed colors. “Would you be willing to . . . help me?”

“Of course,” I said without hesitation. “Tell me what to do.”

“I need you to reach into my pack. Think of needing the bindings . . . erm . . .” His left eye closed, and his nose scrunched in thought. “Wrappings? Bandages.” He closed his eyes. “Bandages.”

I thought of bandages, plunged my hand into the pack, and grabbed what I felt first. Sure enough, they were fabric bandages. “Whatever I think of . . . I can pull out?”

“If it’s something I’ve stored in there, yes.”

“You have a magic bag?” My jaw dropped.

Gerard smiled weakly. “Yes. It makes travel far easier.”

“That’s incredible! It would make packing for journeys so much more efficient!” I turned his bag this way and that. “We could travel without so many wagons!”

“If only you tolerated magic.”

I looked over at him. “Oh. Yes.” I put the pack aside.

I took the largest piece of fabric and dipped it into the water, which had heated due to Gerard’s use of magic. I squeezed the water from the rag until it was damp and turned to Gerard’s leg.

“I can wipe it myself if you’d like. You can just hand me the rag,” Gerard offered softly.

“I want to help,” I insisted. Maybe I could kill him with kindness.

The silence between us was far more comfortable than it had ever been. I went back and forth, slowly cleaning the blood off his leg and around his wound.

“I was raised by my grandmother.”

I lifted my head to see Gerard staring at the crackling logs and held my breath. He'd shared very little about himself with me, and I wasn't going to ruin it by speaking.

"Sometimes I'm not even sure she's my grandmother." He gave a short, nervous laugh and ran his fingers through his hair. "She was . . . *is* very strict. Firm in her teachings, I mean. She doesn't allow for any mistakes without a firm reprimand."

His eyes finally focused on me and I swallowed hard. "She made it clear I would be punished if I didn't return with the autumn stone by the time the last petal on that rose falls."

"Is she a magic user as well?" I dared to ask.

He nodded. "She taught me everything I know. She might be strict, but she's great at teaching and made me who I am."

I slowly drew my knees to my chest.

"She's called a sorceress," he continued. "She's extremely powerful, intelligent, and clever. She introduced me to dark magic . . . I don't know why I'm telling you this. It isn't like you care to know." He shook his head and looked down at his leg.

"But I do," I answered quickly.

Gerard turned to me. "I suppose someone has to," he mumbled flatly.

"I mean it." I bit my bottom lip softly. What on earth was I saying? "I, um, saw the scars. Are those from . . ." I didn't know how to finish. The thought of family members harming each other was completely unfathomable to me.

But Gerard nodded.

My stomach sunk.

"Not all of them directly." He licked his lips and then cleared his throat.

"What do you mean?"

He touched his shoulder where the four claw marks were. "I got these in my youth from a demon of the shadows. Explaining all of this to you seems futile."

"Why is that?"

"Because you don't care." He grabbed his pack and pulled out a shirt.

"I *do* care, Gerard," I argued. I reached out and snagged his hand before I registered what I was doing. My heart pounded and my hand went clammy.

He looked down at our hands.

I dropped it. "I mean, of course I care. I need you in tip-top shape so we can save my kingdom."

He paused a moment, then shook his head. "No, you don't get off that easy." He took my hand again and pulled me close. "Tell me." His voice was soft, gentle, and he reached out and touched my braid.

"I don't understand it," I admitted. "You . . . intrigue me. I don't know if that's the right word. The last person I found attractive is now in a relationship with my brother." I laughed awkwardly.

"You . . . find me attractive?" He eyed me.

"What? No! I didn't say that." My cheeks grew hot.

Gerard's lips spread into a crooked, adorable half-grin that set my heart fluttering like a butterfly. Things only got worse when he took my chin. I avoided his gaze then. But Gerard leaned forward and his lips brushed my cheek, sending shivers up and down my spine and across my scalp.

I shouldn't be this close to him. He was attractive but dangerous. I'd made that decision the night before. But I pitied him as well.

"Why do you hide yourself behind this mask of anger?" he whispered in my ear. "I know you hide your feelings. You're just like me." He let go of my face and allowed me to look up at him.

"Like you?" I murmured. Anger ignited. "I'm not like you. I didn't seduce and then break the heart of a woman who trusted you."

He scoffed and looked me up and down. "You had your best friend arrested because he played a prank on Elisa."

I opened my mouth to object but found no words.

"I know what it's like to hurt, Ismae," he continued. "I understand more than anyone what it's like to parade around and do things just to satisfy someone else. To feel like you have to *be* someone else."

I pulled away and looked down at his leg. We still hadn't set it. I wrapped my arms around myself. "I'm jealous of Keltin. I loved Ulrich," I admitted out loud for the first time, to a boy I barely knew.

He shook his head. "This kind of anger doesn't appear after an event like that. That's just the piece that made it all fall apart." He put his hand on my arm. "You can trust me, Ismae."

"Can I?"

He inhaled slowly through his nose but nodded.

I cleared my throat. "Tell me how to help get this in place so you can take

the medicine and be healed.” I wasn’t ready to think about why I was angry or dig deeper into myself to admit why I despised everyone around me.

Gerard moved his hand with a disappointed sigh and leaned back. “I need two flat planks of wood, like those that are nailed to the windows. Why do you suppose they boarded their windows shut?”

“It may have been because of the attack last year.”

“Attack?”

I gripped the first plank of wood and began pulling. “Last year, an army of magical creatures attacked Cornesh.” I pulled harder, grunting when the nails sprung free and nearly sent me to my rear. “That is the whole reason father banished every magical being into the Weeping Woods in the first place. Magic has been outlawed longer, but the barrier only happened last year.”

Gerard frowned. “You truly have a lot of difficulties with magical beings.”

“Exactly.” I grabbed the second plank, but that one sprung free quickly and unexpectedly. I fell back and grumbled as I rubbed the sore spot.

“Okay, put one plank on each side of my leg. We’re going to need some rope as well.” He pulled some rope from his pack. “Now, very carefully, wrap the rope around the wood. No, no, under the wood *and* my leg.”

I corrected what I was doing, lifting his leg as carefully as possible.

That didn’t stop Gerard from hissing in pain.

I got the rope loosely wrapped around and looked at him to verify it was adequate.

He nodded. “Now, tightening the rope alone won’t help it set. I need . . . I need you to pull on my ankle with both hands.” He looked around, grabbed a stick from the hearth, and bit on it. “Ready?” he asked around the stick.

“I suppose.” I grabbed his ankle with both of my hands.

He nodded.

With all the strength in my meager human body, I pulled back. Simultaneously, Gerard cinched the rope, letting out a scream as he did and biting into the stick so hard I thought it was going to snap. Tears sprung to his eyes, and one even escaped.

I looked down at the leg, and the bone seemed to be in the right spot. It definitely looked better than before. “Not too bad.” I smiled.

Gerard’s face was pale like it had been earlier that day.

“Gerard? No! Don’t pass out on me!”

He fell back onto the floor, once again limp as a sack of potatoes.

I grumbled and looked him over. I’d admitted to him that I found him attractive. Had he used magic to get me to answer that question? I didn’t know. But I did have to be honest with myself—he was attractive. However, I also had to remind myself that he was a dangerous magical being who would be arrested as soon as everything was put back in its right place.

No one would care about his past, how good or bad his grandmother was, or why he was doing what he was—whatever he was doing. He was stealing, using magic, and had even killed to get what he wanted.

Who would ever be able to forgive all that?



THIRTEEN

LIGHTNING CRACKED NEARBY, SENDING A SHOCKWAVE THROUGH

I bolted upright with a gasp and grabbed the thing nearest me, which happened to be Gerard's arm.

"Good thing you found a house for us tonight," he answered, his voice filling the small space. "Have you never been in a storm?"

I hadn't loosened my grip, and I kept my wide eyes focused on the windows and sounds of rain pelting the ground outside. "Sort of," I answered softly. A memory flashed through my mind with the next flash of lightning.

"Tell me about it?" He put his hand over mine.

"I was a child. No older than . . . seven? I'd insisted on joining my father on a journey to visit the jeweler in Chorse. It wasn't that far away. She always made the most fascinating baubles out of glass, and I wanted desperately to go look at them."

Another flash of lightning and my heart jumped into my throat.

I heard Gerard shift and finally turned my gaze to him. "You probably think I'm pathetic. It's just lightning." I let out a nervous laugh and pulled my hand away.

But I flinched when the next bolt struck.

Gerard whispered, "Allul," and the fireplace lit. "The roof is holding up."

I exhaled slowly. "Yes."

"Tell me more about this glass sculptor and Chorse."

"We passed through it when you took me back to the castle."

"That tiny town? Hm."

"They get a lot of shipments of precious jewels from Zelig. The jeweler makes things and then sends them back to be sold or down to Terricina to be traded."

"She must be well known."

I nodded.

"But how does that make you afraid of lightning?" Gerard pressed.

I looked over at him. "I followed him even after he told me not to. He said I wouldn't enjoy that particular trip because a storm was coming in. I didn't listen and set out after him on foot. But the storm came fast from the

south, and I got caught in it all alone. Lightning, rain so hard it felt like hail, and I was lost.”

“That sounds terrifying,” he answered softly.

“I bet you’re never afraid.”

He laughed and shook his head. He was sitting up, his broken leg out in front of him, but he had scooted over so he was near my side. “When I was younger, Selina would punish me by locking me in a closet. She would always summon a creature of the dark. I only realized when I got older, they were mostly harmless, but it had been enough to make me terrified of the shadows.”

“Ah.” I nodded, finally understanding.

“One, in particular, loved to get his claws in me.” Gerard pulled the collar of his shirt down to show me light scars on his shoulder. “Once, I was so terrified of him, I lost control of my powers and broke a portal into the shadow world. Since then, that door has always been a portal to that realm.”

“That sounds awful.”

He pulled the blanket up and over my shoulders. “It is. Every time I must go back. There are . . . powerful creatures in the darkness.”

“If you’re afraid of the shadows and darkness, why are you a necromancer?”

“Because I’m good at it,” he replied simply. “How did you get home?”

I sighed and drew my knees to my chest. “Luckily, Mathias and Tavia were visiting. Mathias had seen me leave and told my mother. She sent one of the soldiers to find me. I was curled up in a ball with my hands over my ears, screaming.” I gave a pathetic laugh and rested my chin on my knees. “I still remember feeling his hand on my shoulder. How relieved I was that he had found me.”

Gerard didn’t respond.

I turned my head, placing my cheek on my knee this time. “Is Selina your only family?”

He nodded. “She’s not very good at it either. She would have left me to find my way home.” He flashed a smile but quickly reached over and grabbed his pack. “I assume you didn’t cook dinner for yourself?”

“I ate some of the dried meat and a roll. I got a potato but didn’t know what spices to use, so I put it back.”

Gerard grinned at me. “You know how to cut up vegetables now. I’m

going to teach you to cook.” He twitched his eyebrows.

“It’s the middle of the night, *and* we’re in the middle of a storm!”

“How does that change the fact we’re both hungry?” He held a potato out toward me.

I rolled my eyes and accepted it from him. “Fine.”

Gerard taught me how to use a small knife to peel the large potato. I cut it up all on my own and then put it in the pan. He then showed me how to chop an onion—which was most unpleasant. It made me tear up and cough! He laughed at me.

I pouted, embarrassed.

He handed me a small jar with herbs in it next. “This has everything we need in it for the food. Sprinkle that on top. Good. See how the onions are starting to get a little brown and translucent? They’re cooked. The potatoes still have a little ways to go, but we are going to add the meat.” He held out a small packet of salted meat, bundled up tightly.

“This is much easier than I thought.”

“It’s not complicated to cook travel food,” Gerard agreed.

I looked over at him. I hadn’t noticed until then that the lightning and thunder had stopped, leaving behind the splashing of rain. “What are feasts like where you come from?”

He got that crooked grin again. “If you think the autumn ball was a celebration”—his smile brightened even bigger than before—“we have feasts like you could never even dream. We have cows with big tusks right here.” He put his index fingers at the edges of his mouth. “And wild pigs that can get as big as a horse! Each clan brings their own brew of mead. There is singing and dancing all out under the stars.” He looked up as if he could see it. “Men battle one another to win the hand of a maiden.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It isn’t like that,” he quickly added. “It isn’t that we choose someone and fight for her. *She* is the one who decides. She sits with her mother, the matron of the family has a lot of power, and she decides the three or four strongest men who will fight at her side. See, Ashwrya views men and women as equals. The woman then presents her four chosen warriors to the chief of the clan. When the clans gather, those four men fight for her hand. If they don’t want to wed her, they resign from the fight and gift her something in return. His best pelt, mount, weapon, or some other thing she

might see as valuable.”

“What is to prevent the women from inviting all of the clans just for gifts?”

Gerard laughed, head tilting back. “That has happened on a couple of occasions. The clan chief limits the invitations to ten men per clan. It’s an unwritten treaty between everyone. The food is done.”

I found myself longing to see Gerard’s land. I always thought of Ashwrya as a frozen tundra, but as Gerard spoke, all I could imagine was something mystical. “I would like to see it.”

Gerard lifted his gaze from his plate of food. “Hm?”

I blushed a little and looked back at my half-eaten plate of food. “Ashwrya. I would like to visit someday.”

“When this is all over, you should go.” He quirked a grin and finished off his food. He tucked his food into his cheek with his tongue, like a little chipmunk. “We’ve still got a couple of hours until dawn. Try and sleep.”

I took my last bite and then set my empty plate on the hearth, away from the flames. As I curled up on the hard floor, I asked, “Do you have beds in Ashwrya?”

Gerard chuckled. “Of course we do, even when we travel. We bring lots of blankets and pillows.”

I rolled my head to look at him. “Well?” I gave him a teasing raise of the eyebrows. “Where is my bed?”

“I may have a magic pack, but it doesn’t hold *everything*.”

“*Tsk*. So disappointing.” I smiled.

He grinned back.

My heart did a somersault, and I pulled my blanket to my chin.

Maybe Gerard wasn’t all that bad . . .



FOURTEEN

I HAD JUST CLOSED MY EYES WHEN I FELT GERARD SHAKING M possibly be dawn,” I complained.

“Sadly it is. You only have a few minutes before you transform, I’m afraid.”

I rubbed my eye and looked out the window I’d taken the boards from to make Gerard’s pitiful cast. Indeed, the sky had already transformed from night to day, and even the robins were singing.

I sighed and sat up. “I hope you regret turning me into a beast.”

Gerard shook his head, a coy smile on his lips. “Not even a little.”

“How is your leg?” I leaned to get a better look just as the transformation took hold of me. The whole act of shifting into a wolf was growing tiresome.

Gerard waited until I was done transforming before sliding a bowl of food in front of me. “It still hurts. It hasn’t completely healed yet, but I can travel.” He pushed himself to stand as if to prove he could make it.

Judging how he had all weight on his good leg, I knew we were going to be making very slow progress that day. Adding the unfortunate timing of the rain, we would be lucky to make it to the Weeping Woods by nightfall.

I gobbled up my food, picked up the bowl, and held it up to Gerard.

He looked down at me awkwardly. “You know, I do have to say having an intelligent wolf for a pet has been a lot of fun.”

I growled, baring my teeth, and snapped at his hand when he reached for the bowl.

“I was joking!” he said, losing his balance and somehow catching himself on the wall. He winced, though, because when he staggered, he had put some weight on his bad leg. “I am only teasing.”

I picked the bowl back up and held it out to him. The day before I was grateful I hadn’t had the horse to try and get Gerard on, but I wished he had it so he could travel easier that day.

The mud did us no favors. Traveling on foot was difficult enough, but trudging through thick mud and weeds made everything much worse. Gerard had found a long tree branch for him to lean on but was even slower than I imagined. We’d walked an hour and were still within eyeshot of the

house we'd left behind.

I finally stepped in front of him and looked up.

"What?" he asked, breathing hard and leaning heavily on the stick.

I jerked my chin toward my back.

He shook his head, saying, "You want me to get on your back? I can travel just fine. Once the sun warms everything up, it will dry, and I'll be much quicker then." He grunted and tried to step around me, but the stick was stuck in the mud. He had to pry it out, nearly flinging it aside as he did so.

Finally he let out a sigh. "All right. I can't imagine this will be comfortable for either of us, but it will have to do." Gerard licked his lips.

I stood still while Gerard tried to straddle my back like a horse, trying my best to push aside all thoughts of what others would think if they saw us and later discovered the truth. But we were out in the middle of nowhere with the nearest home being abandoned.

"This is ridiculous," Gerard muttered under his breath. "I can't even get my leg off the ground completely. This is never going to work."

Oh yes, it is, I thought. I began walking. He was heavier sitting on my back than he had been lying on it. Still, progress was much faster without me waiting for him to take two steps.

Gerard didn't complain, though he made noises of discomfort when his foot bumped on a stone or if I slipped on the mud.

Ruins appeared ahead of us, and I immediately knew we'd reached Cornesh.

"Let me off when we get there. I want to walk around a while. Your back is anything but comfortable." As if to emphasize his discomfort, Gerard shifted.

Avare had been constructed in a similar fashion as Cornesh, only larger. Cornesh had a wall wrapped around the entire city, though, and most of it was demolished. The wall rolled up the hill to the north, and what should have been homes lined deserted streets. Red and brown bricks lay in shambles, and entire sections of the plaster walls were gone.

I stepped through what used to be the gate and entered the city's square on the other side. The remnants of the cobblestone road led from the gate, down the slight incline of earth, and curved around a building. Luckily for us, the stone roads offered solid ground. Grass grew between the stones,

and the beautiful gardens along the inner wall were overgrown with weeds.

Like the city of Avare, the red and brown brick homes had all been built pressed up against each other. Unlike Avare, the shops weren't part of the homes. The shops stood in a square around the courtyard. Most were completely crumbled with only small sections left wearily standing. All but one house, which was completely, and eerily, intact. The only building that stood seemingly without any damage. A reminder of what had once been.

"So, this is the city that was attacked last year?" Gerard looked around, knowingly not expecting me to answer. He climbed off my back. "Strange they didn't rebuild. Remind me to ask you this evening what happened here. It was quite a battle. Those who attacked . . . were they captured?"

I shook my head. A couple had been from what I heard, but I hadn't been allowed to go see them in the prison. Keltin had been. I'd tried sneaking out, but my mother had grown used to me trying to disobey and stopped me before I could escape yet another lesson about how to remain calm under pressure.

Gerard tilted his head. "I wonder . . ." He crouched, letting his wounded right leg slide along the stone until he had his palm against the ground.

I tilted my head and let out a little yip, trying to ask him what on earth he was doing.

"I trust people died during the attack?" He glanced up at me. "I'm a necromancer, remember? I can pull the shadows of their memories. A ghost, if you will. I just need to find one." He closed his eyes and whispered in another language.

The fur all over my body rose, and everything around me went cold. I pinned my ears back to my head and looked around.

Wisps of dark smoke seeped from the ground. They grew in size, rolling until they slowly formed into shapes of people. The sky above us darkened. I watched in amazement, and horror, as the entire courtyard grew dark, and as I turned, the shadows replaced the form of what the buildings had looked like.

A man wheeled his cart of flowers beside the fountain, and two children ran past. I heard their ghostly laughter fade as they darted past me. Another figure was unlocking his shop.

A roar echoed around us, distant and not of this world.

Gerard limped quickly through the smoke that stood in place of the wall.

An ethereal alarm bell echoed from the watchtower I hadn't noticed. No sooner did I spot the tower of smoke than a massive winged beast slammed its tail into it, obliterating the tower and sending the guards flying through the air.

The people in the homes opened their shutters, only to be greeted with dark arrows. The wall exploded toward me. I flinched and sprinted to the side. A handful of creatures ran through—a troll and a couple of other smaller monsters I couldn't quite understand the form of. The smoke moved too quickly to really form a solid shape.

The building next to me caught fire, and I spun around to see a hobgoblin jumping up and down, torch in hand.

Chaos erupted.

People tried to flee their homes as the creatures invaded Cornesh, destroying everything the people knew and loved, killing men, women, and children alike as they flooded the streets and attempted to flee. Luckily the shadows dispersed as the people were stabbed, so I didn't have to look at the bodies lying on the ground.

But one image burned into my mind. The two children who had been running about had run to their father when the battle started—the man with the flowers. He'd begged them to hide. He'd distracted the first wave of monsters and died. But the children were too small to climb the opposite wall and had tried to hide in the corner.

The older of the two was approached by a tall creature with four thin legs like spiders, and a head with a massive horn on the back. The oldest of the two bravely got to their feet, placing their body in the way to protect their younger sibling.

I turned away, but the screams echoed around me.

I curled up in a ball against one of the walls, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to cover my fine-hearing ears with my paws.

The feeling of terror faded.

"Ismae? Is . . . crap." I heard Gerard limping, dragging his leg, as he made his way to me. "They were only ghosts of memories."

I'd never imagined what happened that day.

Not once had I pressed my father for information about the attack.

I never knew children had been killed. I never knew so many people had died. Why hadn't Cornesh been rebuilt? Who could rebuild it after

something so horrific had occurred?

Gerard put his hands on the sides of my head and stroked my fur. “I know how it started. Someone breached the barrier to the Weeping Woods from the outside.”

I peeled my eyes open.

“I don’t know who, I couldn’t see, but I have a suspicion of who it could have been. I don’t yet understand why.” He hesitated and finally sat on the stones in front of me.

The late afternoon sun overhead warmed my fur, and for that I was extremely grateful. Yet, in spite of the light, the city was haunted.

“There was a third guard tower.” He pointed to the southeast side of the city, to the most intact tower. “The soldiers from there were able to send a message by use of a falcon to your father. Within a couple of hours, more messages had been sent to outposts in the land, and soldiers appeared to defend Cornesh. The damage had been done, though.” He looked down at me. “They stopped the attack, captured most of the creatures and placed them back in the Weeping Woods. Others escaped, though I don’t believe they stayed here or you would have been tormented by them the past year.”

I lifted my head and shook my body, letting out the tension that had built up in my muscles.

“If we leave now, we can get into the forest by nightfall.” Gerard winced as he leaned on the tree branch and pushed himself to his feet.

I wasn’t in the mood to journey into a place that imprisoned creatures who could destroy a city like this, but I didn’t want to stay behind with their ghosts either. I got to my feet and hurried over to his side. The mud caked on my legs cracked with my movement. Hopefully, there was a river in the Weeping Woods I could rinse off in.

Gerard limped to the half-broken archway and paused. “I’m going to walk the rest of the way. I’ve slipped a sable leaf under my tongue. It should help with the pain.”

I looked at the woods.

On the outside, it looked like nothing but tall, normal trees with typical foliage. Nothing appeared threatening. Nothing made me think the Weeping Woods could be dangerous. But I’d seen the memories and knew Gerard and I would have to be careful. I knew Gerard was risking his life not being in full health too. If we were attacked, Gerard only needed something to

knock him over and he would be rendered useless. If we entered the woods at night, with me as a human, I would be even more useless than Gerard.

“What’s on your mind?” Gerard asked, limping onward down a path that should have been a road.

I shook my head but nudged it toward the woods.

“Are you nervous?”

I nodded.

“Don’t be.” He gave me a reassuring smile. “I’ll keep you safe. We’ll go in, get Keltin, and get out. What is it you like to say? Ah, yes. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I wondered what *could* happen while trying to get to the Weeping Woods. We *could* get devoured by a creature that lived in the mud. We *could* get unexpectedly struck by lightning. But what if we were attacked by the plants themselves?

All at once, the ground trembled, thunder rumbled, and the plants around us began to reach for our ankles.

Gerard looked directly at me. “Stop thinking!”

I jerked to a stop. *Stop thinking of what?* I wanted to shout at him.

“Focus on the blue sky,” he corrected.

I imagined white, fluffy clouds and nothing else.

Everything stopped.

“I’ll be . . .” Gerard laughed a little. “Do you spend a lot of time thinking?”

I lowered my chin. With nothing to do all day but walk, what else was I supposed to do?

He shook his head, misinterpreting my look. “I didn’t mean women don’t think. I mean . . .” He shifted his weight to the stick. “When you think, do things typically happen?”

I glanced at the sky. Was he implying *I* caused those things to happen? But then I thought back to the bridge. He’d fallen through it. And the night before, I’d convinced myself I saw a monster in the well. Now this.

“I should have come up with a way for you to communicate with me. I can’t understand any . . . Wait. What if you *think* you can do it?” His eyes lit up like a child. “Go on! Focus on you trying to be able to communicate with me.”

This was positively foolish, and I wanted to tell him that. *There is no way*

possible “. . . I could ever be able to *think* something and have . . . it . . .” I heard my voice. Gerard was laughing. Somehow, I was speaking. “What . . . what’s going on? How is this possible?”

“Honestly, I don’t know if it’s because of the enchantment or if you’ve had this ability your entire life, but you are an *orator*.” He was positively beaming. Joy radiated off him. I didn’t know Gerard could ever feel happiness to this extent.

“And what, pray tell, *is* an orator?”

Gerard shook his head. “I don’t know much about them. From what I do know, an orator has the ability to speak and make things happen. Typically small things, such as . . .” He scrunched his nose and mouth to the side in thought. “Perhaps you wondered what the roses would look like if they were orange instead of pink? Or you imagined the clouds took the shape of a puppy.”

My heart stopped.

“Judging by your silence, I am correct?”

I nodded so slowly I wasn’t sure my head had moved at all.

Gerard laughed. “Wow. That’s incredible! What else have you been able to do?”

“How does this happen?” I blurted. “How can I make things happen like that?”

“Relax, it’s not powerful magic.”

“It is too!” I objected. “I thought about you falling through the bridge and floating all the way to Griswil where they would arrest you and I would make you free me of my enchantment without losing the autumn stone!”

“Huh.” He eyed me. “That witch you told me about. Do you know her name?”

I shook my wolf head. “No, just the Witch of the Woods.”

“I wonder if she might have had something to do with it. Maybe we should find her while we’re in there.” He turned and started limping through the cracking mud once more.

“Or *not*,” I said, hurrying after him. “She might catch me and eat me anyway!”

“You’re no longer a baby, though.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s hardly a valid argument right now.”

Gerard chuckled.

I looked up at him. “You should do that more.”

“What?”

“Laugh and smile. You’re handsome when you laugh and smile.” I stepped over a large boulder—being careful not to imagine it being the butt end of some troll.

We were within an hour’s distance of the forest at least, and surprisingly there was a farm to our left.

“We . . . made it an hour . . . without you talking.” Gerard stopped and wiped his brow, breathing hard.

“I’m just going out on a limb here, but I don’t think you can make it through the woods without proper rest.”

He glanced at me. “Sadly . . . I think you’re correct this time.” He heaved a sigh. “I’m in . . . a lot of pain.” He licked his dry lips. He’d finished the water from the water pouch already. “So much for saving a day taking the faster route.”

“It’s my fault. If I hadn’t wished it to happen . . .” I hoped he saw the tilt of my head and look in my eyes as an apology.

“Yes. Shame on you for not being aware of your magical abilities.”

I chuckled. “Good news. There’s a farm ahead. We get another place to rest.”

“I could do with some rest. I may have some herbs to make a potion for the pain.” He looked down at his leg.

I turned in the direction of the farm. “You could try riding my back again.”

Gerard looked longingly toward the farmhouse. “Or you could just ask it to walk to us.”

My laugh came out as more of a bark. “Me? Move a house using words. Ha!”

“Fine. I’ll get on your back. Just get me there in one piece.”

He struggled onto my back, and once he was on, I tried to run. Unfortunately, he was in far too much pain for that amount of movement. I felt guilty for taking his potion for my shoulder after the incident with the crossbow darts.

Neither of us expected the farm to be inhabited, but the nearer we got, the more I realized someone lived there. The fields had been plowed into neat rows with little green seedlings popping up from the soil, and the stench of

animals wafted to us from the nearby barn.

I licked my lips. The thought of a steak sounded divine.

“You’re not killing that cow or their chickens,” Gerard said.

“What on the green earth makes you believe I would do such a thing?” I looked back at him.

“Perhaps the fact you’re currently a wolf with very evident wolf instincts.” He pointed with his stick toward the barn. “If we want to avoid detection, I recommend we go there.”

“The barn?” I groaned but walked the short distance between our hiding spot in the crops and the barn.

Gerard silently got down from my back and peeked his head through the window before motioning me toward the front of the barn. He stopped me again, peeked around the corner, and froze.

“Who are you?” a little girl asked.



FIFTEEN

I GLANCED NERVOUSLY AT THE SKY. WE STILL HAD A GOOD A the sun set, and if she saw a wolf with goat horns, she might be terrified and scream for her parents.

Gerard did his best to lean over. "Hi. My name is Gerard. This is my friend, Ismae." He gestured toward me, though I had kept my distance and couldn't even see the little girl until she poked her head around his leg. Her blond hair almost looked pink, but it couldn't be out here. Her bright eyes widened when she spotted me. "Oh wow! Look at the size of that Fenrir!"

"Ah, she is not Fenrir, though I can see why you would think so." He smiled.

"Good. Because Fenrir is horrible."

"You know the stories?"

"Mother used to tell us all about him!"

Gerard gestured toward me. "You can go see her. She won't harm you. Ismae, lay down so she isn't so intimidated."

I did as he requested, knowing we would be done for if the little girl screamed.

The child wasn't frightened of me at all. She walked right over and started rubbing my nose and head. "Look at these horns!" she exclaimed, tracing her fingers over the curl.

Having her so close, I realized her hair was actually pink. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, revealing a human ear with a fae tip. My heart skipped. She must have been part fae.

"Leata would love to see her. Can I go get my sister?"

Gerard glanced around the building again. "Only if we can hide in your barn while we rest."

"What happened to your leg?" The little girl kept her hand on my head while bluntly pointing to Gerard's leg.

"It got broken."

"Ouch." She held up her finger. "I broke my finger once. Mommy made a special thing to help it. She called it a . . ." She paused in thought.

"Salve?" Gerard offered.

"Yes! That! How did you know?"

He chuckled. "It so happens, I know a thing or two about salves myself. Do you know if she still has that salve?"

The girl lowered her hands to her sides. "No. Mommy is in the woods." She looked toward the Weeping Woods. "We see her at sunset, though! You can come meet her! Maybe she can help you!"

Woods? Sunset? I gave Gerard a wary look, but he didn't meet my gaze.

"Right now, I just need a nap," Gerard said. "Is that all right?"

The girl pouted. "Okay. Come on!" She skipped around the barn and through the propped-open door. "Daddy has the horse out. He's getting us ready to take everything to Bertold for market day!"

Gerard sat down on a crate near the door and grimaced. He took in a breath and then slowly let it out through his nose.

I knew what he was doing, fishing for information to see if it was safe to stay. Thank goodness they were leaving, although I wished they had left last night. Then we wouldn't have been found. Now they likely wouldn't leave until morning. It was too late in the day to leave for Bertold. They would never make it there before nightfall.

"Thank you," Gerard said, offering the girl a smile. "I didn't get your name?"

"It's Nadia." She held out her skirt and did a cute little curtsy.

Gerard bowed the best he could.

"I can get water!"

"And don't tell your father. I'm not sure he would appreciate having guests hiding in his barn." Gerard offered her a little smile before she disappeared out the barn door. He groaned and leaned his back against the wall. He rubbed his eye. "That child is going to get us in trouble."

"What is so wrong just asking the father if we can stay? You're injured," I pointed out. "Surely, he would have mercy."

"Ismae, the girl is half-fae, in case you didn't notice. And by what she said, visiting her mother? I'm betting her mother is fae and was one of the unfortunate beings who were forced into the Weeping Woods."

My heart stilled. "What? But that was supposed to be for evil."

Gerard shook his head. "Magic doesn't do that. It doesn't differentiate between good and bad. It just *is*. If your father had a spell used to trap *all* magical beings, then it would make sense she would have been trapped as well."

The thought unnerved me. If Gerard was right, there could be even more people trapped in the woods who really hadn't caused harm.

I shook my head. "There must be a reason."

Gerard dropped the pack on the floor. "You can pull out the blankets."

"I would assume we don't have the opportunity for a warm meal tonight?" I raised my brows at him.

He groaned. "No, probably not. We don't want to be found, but more importantly, we don't want to burn down the barn."

Nadia reappeared, waddling and carrying a heavy bucket of water in both hands. The bucket was barely half full. "I got it!"

Leata, her older sister, appeared right behind her wearing a scowl on her face. "Nadia, what on earth are you . . . Oh." She froze when she spotted Gerard and me.

Gerard held up a hand. "We mean no harm. We are only resting before we continue onward."

Leata grabbed the back of Nadia's dress, stopping her in the doorway. "People don't travel out this way. We're past Cornesh, and too near the Weeping Woods. Why are you really here?" The girl was smart for being around ten. Of course, being out this far from others, she would have to be to keep her sister safe.

"Lemme go!" Nadia complained, shrugging out of her sister's grip. "He has a broke leg."

"You don't know them."

"He knows about Fenrir!"

Leata sighed. "Nadia, lots of people have heard myths about him."

"I am actually from Ashwrya," Gerard cut in. He dug in his magical pack and produced a stone with the carved face of a wolf with bold, curved lines. I'd never seen anything in that style before in any of the four kingdoms.

Leata nervously hesitated but shook her head. "That *is* neat, but I can't trust you. Come on, Nadia. Let's get back to the house. They can stay out here."

Nadia set the bucket down as near to Gerard as she could before allowing her older sister to drag her away.

Gerard ran his thumb over the carving before finally tearing his gaze away from the girls. "Not a day goes by I don't think about Elisa's sister." He looked down at the stone. He shook his head as he sighed, his broad

shoulders drooping. “I had summoned skeletons to help me battle. It’s . . . so foolish now. But I truly didn’t intend for her to be killed. A skeleton came up behind her and . . . I replay it over and over in my mind.”

I gasped. “Wait, if you’re a necromancer, you can bring her back!”

He turned his gaze to me. “No, I can’t.”

“And why not?” I demanded.

He put the stone in his pocket and slowly started to lower himself to the ground with a grunt. “It’s not that simple to bring someone back from the dead. I would have to find their soul. And then that soul would have to agree to come back with me. I could revive her body, but she would be nothing more than a lost corpse, and that wouldn’t help anyone.” He settled in a pile of fresh hay and let out a sneeze. “It’s too late now.”

Gerard pulled out small packages and bottles of herbs. He carefully read the label on each one and either put it back or set it on the ground beside his leg. It was black and blue, swollen, and still didn’t look like it was healing. I knew his healing potion had worked on my shoulder, but it had barely started healing his leg from what I could see.

I was jolted from my thoughts by a low-pitched crackling sound that radiated like a wave.

Simultaneously, Gerard and I looked at the wall of the barn.

“Did you hear that?” I asked, unsure if my keen hearing had allowed me to pick it up.

“Yes.” Gerard grabbed his stick and pushed himself to his feet.

“It sounded like ice,” I said softly. “I’ve heard that before. In Zelig, when we were ice skating. There isn’t ice out here.”

“Nope.”

The sound radiated around us, and I hurried over to Gerard’s side. Mathias had rushed us off the ice that day, knowing instantly what the sound meant—the ice was cracking.

“Stay here,” Gerard ordered. He limped for the door.

“Your leg—”

“I know, but I have a very bad feeling.” In spite of his evident pain, he limped while heavily supporting himself on the stick.

“I can help,” I offered, staying close by.

“Stay here!” he said just as firmly without looking at me.

I huffed when he closed the doors. But I felt coldness wrap around me.

Intangible to my skin, it seeped through my chest and sunk into my heart, and I shivered in spite of myself. I pushed open the nearest stall door and leaned forward to look through a hole in one of the boards where a knot had once been.

Gerard stood facing the forest, the tip of a sword in his hand resting on the ground. I hadn't seen him with a sword ever. Both his sword and free hand glowed with a purple hue. The tall stick he'd been using to help him walk was gone.

How much power did Gerard truly have?

I saw a man run around the corner of the house and freeze when he spotted Gerard. The light was dimming outside, and I was both grateful, and worried, about becoming a woman again. If something was coming out of the barrier, I would be useless to help.

"Get back in the house," Gerard's voice said in the same strict tone.

"That sound came from the woods," the man replied simply.

"Yes."

They both stood. I imagined Gerard wasn't looking at the man.

Gerard spoke again. "Get your daughters inside."

"I need to see—"

"Get back in your house. Find every candle and light it at each window, then light your fireplace and surround yourself with the candles. Put your children in the circle of light. Go. Now."

"Who are you to—"

"Go now!" Gerard snapped, the purple magic around his hand glowing brighter.

The man took a step back, then disappeared from view.

Gerard turned and made eye contact with me. I didn't understand how he could see me through the wall, but he very clearly had his gaze locked on mine. "Get out of there." He motioned for me. "We need to go into the house with them."

I hesitated only long enough to shove Gerard's herbs into his back, then grabbed the pack in my mouth and hurried out of the barn. As I ran, I transformed and staggered until I collapsed as my legs became different sizes, preventing me from keeping my balance.

"Ismae!" he called.

"Coming!" I yelled back. "Give me a moment!" I panted, pulling myself

to my hands and knees. I grabbed my skirts, muttering about how useless a dress was for situations like these. No wonder Odette wore pants.

Gerard had barely made it to the corner of the barn. “You’re a person again. Great,” he muttered.

“How disappointing, huh?” I glowered at him.

“Your fangs and claws might have come in handy.” He held his arm out.

I took the silent hint and ran to his side, slid my arm around his waist, and allowed him to lean his weight on me while I helped him try and run to the front of the small home.

The purple sword in his hand crackled, and he looked over his shoulder.



SIXTEEN

GERARD DIDN'T EVEN KNOCK BEFORE PUSHING THE DOOR OPEN

The father had Nadia and Leata already sitting in front of an unlit fireplace while he was setting up candles as Gerard had instructed.

Gerard held his hand out. "Allul!" he said loudly.

The candles and fireplace lit simultaneously with a little snap like the snap of a fire.

The man jumped and nearly dropped the candle he was holding. He looked at Gerard with fear and quickly glanced at his daughters.

"Yes, I can use magic," Gerard quickly said. With a shake of his hand, his sword disappeared. "What I need you to do right now is trust me. The barrier has been breached, if only momentarily, and creatures would have escaped. Sit with your children." He looked at me. "Sit by the fire, where the flames are brightest."

The man took his seat on the floor, and both girls crawled into their father's arms.

"See, Leata? I told you he wasn't scary," Nadia gloated.

"You met him?" Their father looked to Gerard, holding the little girl a little tighter.

"In the barn," I explained. "We were going to stay the night, and she saw us."

"Wait, you were the wolf?" Nadia gasped. "Wow!"

"Gerard," I started.

"Ismae, for once, don't argue with me."

"*Princess* Ismae?" I heard the oldest girl whisper to her father.

"I can help!" I argued back.

"No, you can't!" Gerard lowered his voice, his eyes inches from mine, and his jaw flexed. "I saw the gargoyles . . . Dark creatures escaped first. I couldn't stay long enough to see what kind or how many. We need to keep light here as much as possible."

"What about the other towns?" I asked just as softly.

Gerard took a slow breath in through his nose. He flexed his jaw.

Whispering drew my attention to the window. "Voices," I explained when Gerard gave me a quizzical look.

He looked up at the ceiling at the same time I did. It sounded like claws were being dragged across the roof.

I stepped closer to him, holding my arm around him tighter.

He stayed quiet, but I saw his gaze darting around.

I followed his gaze and saw what he was looking at. The shadows in the corners of the room grew longer, teasing the edges of the light and slowly—very slowly—dimming it.

Gerard looked at the man and two little girls. “I don’t know much light magic, but I do know singing songs will help.” He offered them a comforting smile.

The man gave Gerard an understanding look and turned to his girls. “What songs shall we sing?”

“Spring Flowers!” Nadia volunteered.

Leata frowned as if asking if the song would really help, and her father answered by beginning the song.

Gerard closed his eyes and rubbed his lips together. He swallowed hard. “It’s curious, whatever it is. It’s not angry. I think . . . I think I’ve encountered it before. It may be able to sense me. I have to use a light spell. I have to remember the right words. Magic is fragile. If you don’t say the right words the right way . . .” His eyes snapped open. “I remember.” He slid his hand down to my hip and whispered a phrase in a language I didn’t know.

The flames on the candles grew bigger, but they barely lit the room any brighter than before.

Gerard repeated the phrase, keeping his eyes on the corners of the room. When nothing further happened, he closed his eyes, saying the words more loudly, firmly, demanding the candles glow brighter, which they did.

“Come on, candles,” I said. “Glow as bright as you can! Show those shadows what you’re capable of.” If I was an orator, as Gerard claimed, I could at least help *that* way.

The fires popped, and the flames leapt, banishing all shadows from the room, becoming so bright it appeared as midday. At the same time, the icy feeling in my chest disappeared.

I smiled and looked from the ceiling to Gerard.

“I certainly didn’t expect that,” he muttered.

We remained silent for a few more moments before Gerard whispered,

“Lulla.” The candles went out instantly. “Allul,” he said, and the lights burned at their normal brightness.

He looked over at the man and his family. “Your singing helped. Did you see those flames go bright?” He smiled.

Leata beamed. “We really did help?”

“Course we did, silly!” Nadia answered back. She hugged her dad around the neck. “Mommy’s songs always help.”

I looked around, catching a framed painting of a woman sitting on the mantel. Her eyes were bright, her smile big and beautiful. “She would be proud of you,” I said quickly.

Gerard took my hand. “Forgive us for bursting into your home. We also didn’t intend to hide in the barn. Well, we did, we just didn’t plan on being found out. We would have left unnoticed in the morning.”

The man rose to his feet, still holding his youngest. “If you’d like to sleep in their bed, you may.” He looked between us. “I won’t be able to get them to sleep without me the rest of the night anyway. They can share my bed.”

“Oh, we aren’t . . .” I started.

The man looked down at our hands.

Gerard glanced at me, then slowly lowered his hand away from mine. “Princess, you may take the bed.”

I should have been grateful for it. I should have run to the bed and flopped down and fallen into a deep sleep. I surprised myself when I gave Gerard a gentle push. “You need it more than I do with that leg of yours.”

He opened his mouth but glanced at the others, evidently not wanting to argue in front of them.

The man took his daughters to his room and closed the door.

I helped Gerard to the room and sat him down on the bed. “How long has it been since you slept in a bed?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

In the dim light, I realized how weary he appeared. I helped pull the packets of herbs back out and even went to the kitchen to find a small pail of water to bring back to Gerard. I sat on the bed at his side and watched him carefully place various sizes and colors of leaves into a mortar. He broke some in half and placed one half in the mortar, the other back in the tiny bag. When he was done, he crushed them with the pestle until he got a fine powder. Only then did he add the water and mix it until it became a

thinner and thinner paste.

"I thought you were making something to drink," I said.

"I thought about that, but salves offer far more instant relief and tend to last longer." He scooted back and tenderly lifted his broken leg onto the bed.

I moved so he could get it up without me being in the way. "You asked me why I am so miserable."

He lifted his green eyes to mine. "I did."

"I never feel like I live up to my parents' expectations," I confessed. "Everything I wanted to learn as a child, they quickly discarded. Such as hunting. They've always been proud of Keltin. Their firstborn was a son, one to carry the crown and legacy of the family. Me? What good am I?" I scoffed and shook my head.

Gerard untied the rope holding the boards on and slowly released it. He let out a hiss between his teeth. His leg looked . . . worse than bad. It looked like it might die and fall right off. "Keep going. It will distract me," he said. He took the salve and slowly began rubbing it on the most bruised part of his leg.

I wiped aimlessly at my filthy skirts. "All right. Do you know what my parents have raised me for? To be a bargaining chip. To marry me off to the finest prince they can find." Rolling my eyes, I sighed. "When I was twelve, I became a woman. I was no longer allowed to hunt with Keltin and Father because I had to learn how to run a castle."

"Do your parents know how you feel?"

"I told them repeatedly after everything changed. I begged them to let me continue being taught like Keltin. I threw a fit one day because Keltin got to go on an assignment on his own, I forget what it was, and I was forced to stay behind so I could meet the noble boys in the land. My mother pulled me aside and scolded me for being selfish." My words caught in my throat. "She actually called me that. Selfish. Because I didn't want to be *assigned* someone to marry. Now, with Mathias being the only prince willing to take me . . ."

We sat in silence a moment.

"Do you like him?" Gerard asked cautiously.

I let my fingers trail along the trinkets on the short table beside the bed. "I don't know. He seems kind enough. He reminds me of you, though. All

mysterious.” I hesitantly lifted the corners of my lips.

Gerard gave me his crooked grin. “Then why not marry him?”

“I think . . . honestly?” I held a shimmering rock in my hand and ran my thumb over its ragged surface. “I think I feel alone. I don’t want to be forced to marry someone. I want to be the one to choose.” I bit my lip.

He inclined his head. “Could it be that you aren’t mad at Ulrich and Keltin for being in love at all? But you are mad that you didn’t have a choice to wed someone of your choosing?”

“Yes.” Realization dawned on me. I’d been so beastly the last few years because *everything* in my life was decided for me—what I would learn, what I ate, wore, where I went, and even who I would potentially marry. I set the rock down and looked at Gerard. “My responsibility as the princess is to wed whoever will bring the best for our country. My father has always believed that to be Mathias. I believe I only wanted Ulrich to thwart my father’s wishes.”

Gerard rubbed the last of the medicine on his leg. “I believe you may be right.”

I let out a sigh. “It doesn’t matter now. No one else in the surrounding area has a prince in line.” I reached into his pack, then pulled the blankets out.

“What about a prince from Ashwrya?”

I raised my brow. “I don’t think my father would even dare try and make a treaty with . . . them.” I’d caught myself before saying *barbarians*. Gerard wouldn’t have appreciated it.

He tilted his head.

“You can’t possibly understand what this is like.” I held a blanket out to him.

The corner of Gerard’s lip lifted. “No, I don’t know what it’s like to be a woman. But I do know what it’s like to have someone hold daunting expectations over you. You asked me to be honest?”

I nodded.

He lay down on his back. “When my grandmother discovered I could use magic, it was as if nothing else mattered. She trained me all hours every day. As far as fulfilling expectations, she has no desire to see me married off. In fact, that would only thwart her plans.”

“What about Elisa?” I asked with a scowl.

He shook his head. "I had to pretend in order to get the stone, and it was the only way I could do it without harming anyone."

I raised my brows.

Gerard sighed. "It all sort of fell apart. Selina was furious and punished me severely for it."

"H-how?" I whispered.

"She made me spend three days and nights in the shadow realm." His eyes became distant. "I ran for my life all three days and nights. I mean it when I say it's a horrible place. My powers have . . . little effect in a place like that."

I took Gerard's hand. "Even though I was never punished like that, it seems we may actually have something in common."

Gerard's face softened, and he smiled genuinely.

We sat in surprisingly comfortable silence.

We had made a connection. For the first time in my life, there was someone who actually understood me. Gerard had exposed a piece of his vulnerability to me, and I knew he'd never shared some of those thoughts with anyone else. Who else did he have to tell?

My heart suddenly ached, and my throat tightened.

What kind of life did Gerard lead? Constantly deceiving people to help a powerful sorceress or be punished for it . . . what sort of life was that? Never getting to have a friend or lover?

I might have felt alone, but my mother was right.

I had been selfish. I was surrounded by people who loved me, and I constantly pushed them away, for what? A choice?

When all of this was done, I would wed Mathias if that was what my father wanted. I would be a good queen and companion because at least I wasn't truly alone like Gerard.

Gerard's eyes closed.

It was my turn to stay up and watch him.

Once again, neither of us had eaten a proper dinner, but I wasn't hungry. Eventually, I took the blanket and blew out the candle before I laid down on the floor.

Gerard understood me because he was like me.

He was alone, having only a crazy sorceress to turn to for help. Elisa was right. He needed someone there for him. Maybe that someone could be me.



SEVENTEEN

I WOKE BEFORE GERARD FOR THE FIRST TIME AND WAS ABLE TO see he had bags under his eyes, and I wanted to know what caused him so much restless sleep. I couldn't function on as little sleep he seemed to get.

His leg was far less black and blue, having had an opportunity to rest without any strain all night.

He was . . . handsome.

The strength of his jaw, curve of his nose, and point of his chin shone in the dawning light. Knowing I would soon be a wolf, I reached out and touched his face. He was warm. I didn't understand why that fact surprised me. Perhaps it was because he came across as so cold. I slid my finger up into his hair and rubbed my thumb over his brow.

He snatched my wrist, eyes snapping open with a sharp inhale.

"Easy. It's just me," I quickly said. I wished I hadn't woken him. He needed sleep.

Gerard studied me, pupils slowly focusing. He relaxed his tight grip. "I'm sorry." He rubbed his eyes with the base of his hands. "What time is it?"

"Dawn." I absently rubbed my wrist. "Robert is cooking breakfast. He's the father. I warned him I would return to a wolf form, and that startled him. I probably should have been more . . . subtle."

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at his leg. "Travel should be much easier today. Thank you for letting me rest." He gave me a little smile that was big enough to warm my heart.

I wanted to tell him that I was no longer a beast, that I felt the same about him, but I transformed and let out a sigh instead. Tell Gerard how I felt? Tell him I had developed feelings for him? He would think me a foolish princess ready to fall in love with the first man I met.

Gerard gathered his pack, bandages, and stick before hauling himself out of the bed. He patted my head. "I know you hate it, but I don't know how else to show my affect . . . tion . . . uh, I mean appreciation." He rubbed his neck. "Let's get out of here. We've lost enough time as it is."

He moved on before I had time to react to what he'd said. It had to have been a slip of the tongue, he didn't mean *affection*. Not toward me, a beastly princess.

We didn't spend much time eating breakfast, not wanting to delay in our journey or cause Robert and the girls a late start for their trip to Bertold. Robert kept the girls in the bedroom until we left. As we headed for the woods, I heard the girls complaining to their father through an open window. They were disappointed.

I was disappointed too. There were a lot of questions I still wanted to ask Robert, like why his wife had been locked beyond the barrier and how she was doing. Not that I could have asked him as a wolf anyway.

Gerard and I walked the short distance to the edge of the woods and stopped.

He looked at the ground. "Can you feel that?" he asked. He reached his hand out toward a trail of sticks with little purple flowers that had vibrant-green centers.

I lowered my nose until I almost touched them, then finally understood what he meant. There was a soft electrical pulse, like when you stub your toe and it throbs. I looked to my left and then right. The purple-green flowers appeared the entire distance I could see.

I looked up at Gerard. "The barrier is made from flowers?"

"Not any flowers," he whispered. "These aren't from here."

"Where are they from?"

His brows pinched. "I can't remember." But he wouldn't look at me as he straightened, and I knew he was lying.

"Gerard, we know each other enough to know—"

"They're from the mirror realm." He sighed and stepped over the flowers. White bursts of light sparked around his form as he did so.

"Do you want me to come?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Unless you really want to sit there the next day or two while I search for your brother."

I stepped over the barrier and up to his side. "Let's get Keltin."

"Let's do it." He nodded to me and began through the foliage until he found the path. "I admit, for it being called the Weeping Woods, I expected it to be more . . ."

"Haunted?" I finished.

"I was going to say magical."

It was a normal forest. He was right. There was nothing special about it. That was until we followed the trail around the clump of pink rhododendron

bushes. The instant we stepped past the pink-edged flowers, it was as if we'd stepped into a different world.

There was a murky swamp on either side of the trail with trees poking out of the water like skeleton fingers. The trees were white but covered in beautiful green moss with pink and purple flowers, and in their branches hung glass bulbs with light from them.

"That's faerie fire," Gerard explained, eyes alight.

"Does that mean there are fae in here?"

"Yes. I also recommend we walk carefully across the path. There could be something in the waters. Fae can be dangerous."

"Elisa is interested in Dormir. Is that dangerous for her?" I asked, allowing Gerard to lead the way. If something was going to happen, he could be the first to get hurt.

Gerard shrugged. "I doubt it. Fae aren't dangerous to those they like, but they're very cautious."

"You were with them when they went to the fae kingdom. The one *you* destroyed."

Gerard gave me that annoyed sigh of his and glanced at me. "That was months ago. Before . . ." He shook his head.

"Before what?"

His shoulders lifted. The breeze caught pieces of his hair, moving them across his face. "Before Elisa showed me what mercy is. I still don't understand it, why she let me go. That's not justice, which is what I expected and, quite frankly, deserved. But she made me start wondering if maybe everything Selina taught me is . . . I don't know. A lie?" He shook his head. "I shouldn't say such things out loud."

"Are you afraid she might hear you? Here? In these woods?" I looked around. For half a moment, I thought I saw a face of moss lift from the surface of the water, but when I blinked, I realized it was nothing more than the shell of a large tortoise.

Gerard quirked a little smile. "She has eyes everywhere, Ismae. I have a feeling she had something to do with that breach last night. So, yes. I believe she can hear us. Best be safe."

We made it across the swamp without so much as even the sight of a magical creature, much to my discouragement.

"Wait, didn't you say you've been here before?" I pointed out. "You

should know what the forest looks like.”

“I didn’t drag Keltin into the woods. I’m a magical creature, remember? I’m not sure I can make it back through the barrier.”

“Then how did he get in?”

“I sort of . . . pushed him across.”

I shook my head. “And you’re telling me we might not be able to get back out now?”

Gerard shrugged. “It’s possible. But I’ll figure out a way. I always do.” He winked at me, confidence in his swagger.

The path forked left and right, and of course there was no sign posted telling us “Avoid the Witch” or “This way to Keltin.”

“Should we split up?” he asked.

“How am I supposed to know what Keltin looks like?”

“He’s a troll. Like those that lived under those bridges when you were a child. Did you never see one even then?” He looked down at me.

I blew a raspberry. “Possibly? We were often in the royal carriage and never dealt with those sorts of things.”

“Ah. Of course not. I could describe one to you, but I’m afraid you would consider any large beast a troll.”

I inclined my head. “Are you being condescending? Because I’m smarter than I look.”

“There’s no denying that.”

“There’s that tone again!”

Gerard put up his hands. “I’m not using a tone. I meant it. You and your friends are nothing like Selina described.”

I frowned at him.

He continued. “She described your people as being behind, that your magic is stagnant and none of you have a desire to further your prosperity. Most of that is right, but not the way I believed.”

“So you’re only halfway offending me.”

He rolled his eyes. “Can we just get back to finding your brother and get on with all of this?” He turned left and began walking down the path.

“Why are you choosing that direction?” I asked, remaining seated in the crossroads.

“It doesn’t keep shifting, which makes me believe the other direction has some sort of mirage spell on it.” He waved for me to follow.

I looked down the opposite path. How he was able to tell things were shifting, I didn't understand. It didn't look any different to me. Nothing shimmered aside from the sunlight sparkling through the leaves.

But I followed him.

"If those were the swamps from the stories, do you think the Witch of the Woods is nearby?" I asked softly, noticing how the swamp waters remained to our left.

Gerard was silent a moment before answering. "I'd forgotten that detail. If she's real, it's possible. Maybe that's what the mirage spell was hiding—the entrance to her cottage lair." He grinned at me.

"What if it wasn't a cottage at all?" I teased back. "We could have walked right into the waters of the swamp. Maybe she lives in its depths."

"Or perhaps inside one of the trees." He pointed to a massive tree that was so wide it looked like twenty tree trunks smashed together.

We exchanged a glance and both laughed.

"How terribly funny would it be if her cottage was just beyond the tree?" I felt my tail wag and ran off the path toward the tree.

"Careful," Gerard warned. "There might be plants or something out there that can cause harm."

I ignored him and bounded around the girth of the tree.

And froze.

The tree sat on the top of a shallow hill, but the side opposite the one I'd approached steeped down deep into a gorge. And sitting in that gorge was a tiny house built from stones stacked together that seemed to be held in place by the moss blanketing the outside. Had it not been from the puff of smoke dancing away from the thatched roof, I don't know if I would have noticed it.

"Is there a spider or something?" Gerard teased as he approached me. He stopped at my side. "Now *that* is creepy."

"I didn't make that happen, right?" My voice was so quiet when I asked I wasn't sure I'd asked the question out loud until Gerard answered.

"No. You have magic, but your type of magic isn't nearly strong enough to summon something like that. No offense."

"We should go. I don't like the feeling here."

"Agreed." Gerard put his hand on my head but kept his gaze locked on the house while we turned. He looked away as we walked back around the

tree the way we'd come.

Vines sprung up all around us.

A handful seized Gerard's wrists and started pulling him back. "No, you don't," he said through gritted teeth. He tightened his hands into fists and purple magical light ignited around his hands and shot down his arms. The vines fell off, only to spring up again. This time, they wrapped around his torso and legs and dragged him down the hill swiftly.

"Gerard!" I ran after him, snapping at the vines with my teeth. There was nothing I could do to stop them. More vines seemed to come from the ground with each mouthful of vines, leaves, and dirt I snatched. Soon we were both in the gorge.

"Oof!" he exclaimed as his back slammed up against the trunk of a black tree, stealing his breath. The vines pulled his arms straight back. They entwined down his arms, forcing his palms together, then wrapped around his fingers.

"Run!" he shouted at me. One final thick vine covered his mouth, effectively gagging him.

A flurry of thoughts ran through my head—I needed to get him safe, but the vines were clearly triggered by some form of magic, which meant if I made a wrong move, I could end up wrapped against a tree too. One thing was certain, I was *not* leaving him alone in the woods, and not just because I needed his help. Even worse, we still hadn't seen who had summoned the vines, though in my heart I knew there was only one explanation.

"The bones told me you were here," a gravelly voice stated.

I nearly jumped out of my skin and wheeled to face the crooked old woman with wrinkles so heavy and thick they looked like the deep grooves of the tree branch above Gerard's head. Her eyes held no color, and her pupils were gray. Ashen-white tree branches curved from under her hood and down across her forehead, barren of leaves.

"You brought a friend." She smiled at me with rotten teeth.

I took a step away. "Who are you?" I demanded, my voice quavering.

"I believe you call me the Witch of the Woods." She motioned to me. "You should come and eat with me. You must be famished, darling." She stretched a wrinkled hand toward the cottage behind her.

I didn't budge.

The woman chuckled—a horrible sound that made me wonder how she

hadn't burst into coughing. Her gray gaze shifted to Gerard. She slowly approached him. "It was you I found with the bones. Selina's beloved pupil. And now you come to me."

She reached out and held her hand out in front of his face, curling her fingers until her nails nearly touched his skin. "Ah. The darkness grows within you with each passing day. Did Selina warn you of the consequences of dark magic? Surely she . . . oh."

Gerard's eyes slammed shut, and his teeth sunk into the vine in his mouth.

"You aren't powerful enough to keep me out, Gerard. Not yet." She chuckled again. "Darkness . . . complete, beautiful darkness. Oh, she's focused your training on necromancy. I see you are quite skilled, but not yet perfect. I could help, you know. But you're afraid? Ah. Of course. The shadow realm."

Gerard's eyes snapped open with a look of wild fear.

The gaze stung my heart.

"Leave him alone," I said softly, uncertainly.

Tears trickled down Gerard's cheeks, and he tried to twist his body away from the tree.

"I said leave him alone!" I rushed at the old woman and slammed into her with everything I had.

She didn't budge.

"You're afraid of the Don'gklok," she whispered.

Gerard cried out, eyes slamming shut once more. I didn't know how she was able to read his mind, but it must have been agonizing if he was crying.

"She gathers the stones. She already has possession of the spring, summer, and winter stones. The last she needs is the autumn. Why, dear boy? Show me. Show me what my sister wants . . ."

"The vines aren't that strong. They're just pieces of nature. You're stronger than they are, Gerard!" I shouted. I jumped to my feet and shoved the old woman again, but this time, I slid under her arm and used my body to separate her from Gerard.

Her hand dropped, and she blinked as she took a step back. "You . . ."

She smiled at me again. "The girl who got away. The sweet princess. You know . . . your *real* father must watch you from afar and wonder every day about you."

“My father is the king,” I said firmly. “You’re trying to get me to believe in something that isn’t true.”

“The king is who saved you. Your father was pathetic, which is why I chose to take you from him.”

I trembled from head to toe, uncertain if it was adrenaline or fear.

The woman turned and started walking toward the cottage. “Come with me, Princess Ismae. We have much to speak of. It’s unfortunate you’re stuck in that beastly form.”

“You won’t eat me,” I ordered.

“Of course not.” She stopped and looked over her shoulder at me. “I only eat infants.” Her lip curled in a cruel curve and she carried on.

I turned to Gerard, desperately wanting to cup his face in my hands. “Are you all right?”

He was swallowing, trying to compose himself, but he was still bound to the tree. He finally opened his eyes and turned his head.

I positioned my paws on his chest and tore the vine from his mouth.

“You cannot trust her, Ismae,” he said quickly. “She’s full of darkness. Her powers . . . her strength is in mind manipulation. Whatever she tells you, she might be trying to control you. I’ve only felt strength like that from Selina. She will kill you when she gets the chance! You must run.” His green eyes searched mine desperately.

“And how could I leave you behind? We still have yet to find Keltin. If I must speak with her to get both of those things, how could I not?”

“Because . . .” He gritted his teeth. “You’re more important than I am. She couldn’t kill me, not with Selina being my mentor.”

“No, but I can keep you as a pet,” she called back to me. “I grow impatient, my little dragonfly.”

I fell back down to my paws. “I’m going to help you, Gerard. I can do this.”

“I know you can. Please listen. You have magic, Ismae. Don’t forget that.”

Behind me, a door creaked open.



EIGHTEEN

I FOLLOWED THE WITCH OF THE WOODS INTO THE COTTAGE.

The inside was just as dismal as the exterior, dimly lit by rusting wall sconces, covered in dust and dirt, piles of . . . things shoved in every corner of what should have been the sitting room.

I didn't step off the rug inside the door.

"You don't need to be frightened, dear girl."

"You stole me as a child and nearly ate me. Why shouldn't I be afraid of you?"

She removed her cloak and hung it on a rack, and it was then I saw the branches weren't part of some ornamentation or headdress, but they grew from her scalp. She turned to me. "I believe the young man tied to a tree outside once told you not to judge others by how they look?" She arched a brow.

"Your actions are what made you ugly," I stated.

Her lip tugged. "In more ways than you will ever know. What do you know of the boy?"

"Enough."

"Are you aware of why he wants the four stones of Tern Tovan?" She hobbled to the kitchen and retrieved a small teakettle from a dusty shelf and filled it with water from the tap before she hung it over the fire.

I hesitated, not even aware of who Tern Tovan was. "Of course not."

"Yet, you are willing to part with one for, what? A cure to a very basic enchantment spell?" Her raspy chuckle made the hair on my neck stand.

I suddenly wished I was in my human form. "I know nothing of magic myself. And if you must know, Gerard agreed to release me from the spell as soon as we get my brother and return to the castle."

"Yes. The castle. The enchantment bled. Light magic hasn't ever been easy for him. Gerard knows very little light magic. His heart will be consumed by Selina's magic before the end of the year, and Selina will have added yet another victim to add to her collection." The teakettle on the fire whistled. The Witch of the Woods limped to the fireplace and removed the kettle from the flames. "Tea?"

"No." I quickly added, "Thank you."

She scooted to the coffee table and opened the lid to the teapot. "I can help, and you can retain the family treasure you are so willing to part with."

"In exchange for . . . the boundary being broken?" I scoffed. "I'm no fool. People like you don't deserve to be free."

"People like me?" Her gray eyes lifted to me so slowly, I felt my stomach sink. The fingertips of fear danced up my spine. "Dear girl, you meet very few magical beings, and those you do meet you have locked away in the prison for a harmless teasing spell."

My lips tightened. How did she know about Ulrich?

"I don't need to claw into your mind to read what you've done, girl," she mocked. "You have it written on your face."

"My name is *Princess Ismae*," I said firmly. "And you will address me as such."

"The beast princess?" Her singing tone resonated off my bones. "You don't look like one. Let's dismiss this enchantment for a time, shall we? Speak woman to woman?" She waved her hand, and I transformed back to my human form just like I did at night.

I ran my hands over my dress and watched her silently.

"Much better." The witch opened various jars of dried herbs, but I couldn't see what kind as she pinched and dropped them into her metal infuser. She closed it and set it into the teapot, then lifted her gray eyes to me.

"Why did you wish to speak to me alone?" I finally demanded.

"To offer a proposition. I allow you safe passage to find your brother."

"In exchange for?"

"The boy." She gingerly poured the tea into the cups with surprisingly steady hands despite her knotted fingers, then lifted one of the teacups and plates to me.

I continued to stare.

Gerard had warned me not to trust her. We'd barely begun searching the woods for Keltin, yet we had managed to find the witch. What were the chances of us finding her before Keltin? That we would enter the woods at *just* the right spot?

The silence between us grew more intense until she finally lowered the tea and set it on the table. "You feel you and Gerard are similar. He comes from a dismal childhood, you are displeased with yours, and therefore he

will be your one true love? You've found the one person who finally understands you?" Her chuckle grew into a laugh. "Pathetic children with dreams in their eyes and no idea what the real world is like. That boy will only bring you heartache and misery, not just you but your kingdom. Nay, the entire land! If you give him that autumn stone, the world you know and love will be lost."

"I am not leaving him behind with you," I said firmly. "I don't believe your lies."

I turned to the door, but there was no handle.

"I have been stuck here for decades while Selina dances around freely. I finally have the opportunity to bring her to me, and I will not give that up for some orphan who believes he is king!" She marched toward me.

I turned and faced her. I was about to throw in an insult about her being old and alone for so long—it wouldn't have surprised me if she didn't remember things correctly—but I bit my tongue. Keltin would have been proud of me. "Let me out," I demanded.

The witch stopped uncomfortably close.

She reached her hand out toward me. I didn't know what she was going to touch, but I snatched her wrist. In that instant, I felt a rush of ice in my heart, the prickle of tree branches scraping my cheek, desperation, sorrow—eternal sorrow so deep there was no bottom—loneliness, and betrayal.

"Selina made you this way," I said. "Your heart was turned by her."

"How are you—"

"But not all is lost," I continued. "Actions of goodness, mercy, acts of light can change that. You can be saved if you just look to the light."

She pulled her hand away from me, taking with it all the thoughts and feelings she'd accidentally shared. "You have magic." Her eyes became hungry, and the shadows in the corners of the room began to lengthen.

I tried to swallow, but my throat was dry. I blindly searched the door behind me but couldn't feel any way to open it. "You can change," I reminded her. "Acts of mercy! Let your first act of mercy be to let me go. Let Gerard and I pass through and those will be your first steps to regaining your heart."

The woman laughed. "The girl who got away. You have some of my power still in you. Perhaps it's time to finish what I started."

I turned and grasped at the hinges, desperately trying—and failing—to

pry it open.

“Stay away from the woods that weep, from the sounds of tears that run deep. The witch within will devour you whole, and sip a year upon your soul,” the witch sang.

The melody tickled its way into my mind.

I’d heard it since I was a child.

But her icy fingers gripped the back of my neck.

“If I have magic, let me use it now to open this door!” I shouted. The door flung open. I didn’t take time to be startled by it—I ran.

As I stumbled down the stairs, my wolf legs taking over once again. The witch’s dismissal of the enchantment must have only been temporary. I bolted for Gerard.

He shook his head. “No! No, I can handle her! Go find Keltin! He’s with the trolls. Just find the goblin village and they’ll take you to him. Go now!”

I didn’t believe he could handle the witch. He was still tied to the tree in spite of his evident attempts to break free. The witch cackled behind me, and I sprinted into the nearby trees.

The branches clawed at me, grabbing clumps of fur as I tore through the undergrowth. I heard the branches snap behind me and the metallic tang of magic filled the air as I escaped the magical trees. My momentum threw me forward and down a hill toward the swamp. I dug my claws into the tender grass, and before I could plunge into the mysterious waters, I managed to slow myself to a stop.

Panting, I hauled myself back to my feet and looked up the hill toward the still-moving trees. They were tugging out their roots!

“I’ll come back for you, Gerard!” I shouted with everything I had.

I turned and ran away from those moving trees.

I ran from the witch.

I ran from Gerard.

I needed to find the goblins, he’d said. Goblins. In a forest with walking, attacking trees and who knew what other dangers?

I spilled out onto a well-used path and finally took a moment to catch my breath. Which direction did I need to go? Gerard had the pack with the supplies. I hadn’t even thought about grabbing them. But I could make do. I could figure things out.

“Do you know where I go to find the goblins?” I whispered to the bush of

red roses in front of me. How could something so beautiful be used for darkness?

I felt helpless. I'd promised Gerard I would be back to save him, but who was I kidding? I was a princess, and even in a wolf form, the witch had to have been far more powerful than me. She made the trees chase after me!

The rose bush I'd spoken to moved.

I gasped and stepped back, my fur bristling, and I growled a warning.

The branches of the bush untangled and, to my absolute astonishment, took on the form of a small girl. The roses cascaded, forming her hair and clothing. Her eyes were the same beautiful shade of red as the flowers.

"Who are you?" I asked, slowly relaxing.

"Seludra. What is your name?"

"Ismae." I glanced around. Two of the trees behind the little girl were also looking at me, their arms no longer extended over their heads like branches. "You . . . aren't really bushes and trees?"

She giggled. "No, silly. We are nymphs. We've been part of the Darning Forest longer than you've been alive."

"Sadly, we are no longer able to spread out and bless the forests with prosperity," one of the trees added. Her voice was firmer and dripped with distrust.

"What are you doing in the woods, beast?"

I licked my snout. "I need to find the goblin village."

"Goblins?" The women laughed.

"The goblin children are good," the rose bush nymph said to me. "Please do not harm them."

"I have no intention of harming them," I promised. "I need them to point me to the trolls so I can save my brother, and then I must return to the Witch of the Woods and rescue Gerard."

"Vivian," the girls murmured to each other.

"What business have you with the witch?" Seludra asked. "She is dangerous."

"I know. She stole me as a child. But she took a . . . friend of mine. And I am the only one here who knows and can help him. I don't know how. I can't fight a witch. But perhaps with Keltin's help, I might be able to get Gerard out of her grip."

The nymphs looked at one another in a silent conversation, their gazes

moving from one to another before settling on me again.

Seludra grinned and reached up to touch my horn. “You are Ismae. Princess of Arington.”

“I am. And before you say anything about the barrier, I know discussions need to be had about releasing creatures of light. Like you. I assume you are creatures of light . . .” I swallowed.

Seludra nodded. “We are creatures of nature. The earth itself is pure energy, light as you say. We would very much like to be free.” I felt her fingers following the curve of my horn.

“We would like to help you,” one of the tree nymphs stated. “The goblin village is far. You must journey all day and all night before you reach it.” She pointed to her right.

“Whatever you do, do not stop and rest tonight,” the second added.

Seludra’s touch moved to my other horn and explained, “The shadows move at night. Creatures of darkness that despise the light remain hidden during the day or in parts of the forest light doesn’t touch. Which is why I am blessing you with some magic to help.” She stepped back. “Your horns will glow tonight, offering light along the path where there is none.”

The tallest of the tree nymphs bowed her head to me. “Go toward the Dragon Mountains to the north. You should see the tall peaks through the trees and know you are going the right way.”

“Oh, and one more piece of warning,” the nymph’s yellowish leaves said. “Don’t eat the berries that don’t glow.”

I didn’t see how that advice would help me, it wasn’t as if I was planning on eating *any* berries. I just wanted to have everything done with.

After thanking them each, I left the nymphs behind.

Don’t eat berries that don’t glow.

Don’t stop to rest.

Don’t get killed.



NINETEEN

THE AIR WAS HOT AND MUGGY. MY STOMACH GROWLED. ALL hear voices whispering and giggling, but whenever I turned, the voices stopped. It was like trying to find the cricket chirping outside the window.

For the first time, I wished I wouldn't transform that night. If I met any danger, I needed to be able to fight it, and my wolf form was far more efficient and dangerous than a princess walking around without even a stick to protect her.

But the transformation happened, the whispering words stopped, and shadows began to move in the canopy overhead. As Seludra promised, my horns produced a beautiful white glow, just enough to light my path as I walked. They told me not to rest, yet I was positively exhausted. I'd spent the entire day traveling, had fled from a witch, and all I wanted was a pot of Gerard's amazing stew and to curl up by a fire.

Within an hour, my human feet ached.

Leaves rustled behind me, and I turned quickly to see what it was.

The form of a man stood just beyond the glow from my horns.

I took a step back. My hands grew clammy and my heart began to race. Was I supposed to pretend he wasn't there? Pray he couldn't see me? Run and hide?

He took a step forward with every step back I took.

Suddenly, everything inside of me told me to run. I turned, grabbed my skirts, and ran down the dirt path as fast as my legs could take me. My lungs burned, my ribs ached, and my body protested, but I ran for my life.

A hand darted out and snatched me by my elbow.

I screamed.

A hand clamped over my mouth and dragged me to the ground on the side of the path.

"Shhh!" A voice demanded into my ear. "Domg dod." His breath reeked of fish, and I resisted the urge to gag.

I peered up through gaps of the branches of the bush and saw the shadow man pause, look around, and carry on his way.

"Gone domg." The hands holding on to me let go.

I sat upright and turned to see three round faces with small beady eyes

and floppy green ears. One had a bottom lip that stuck out over his top lip. All of them were bald save a tiny nub of horns. One had one horn in the middle, the second had two horns, and the third had three.

I studied their faces carefully. “You . . . must be goblins?”

The third grunted and smacked the chubby arm of his friend. The three of them backed off immediately.

“Wait, please,” I begged. “I came to ask for help. You don’t have to do anything. Just tell me where I can find the trolls.”

“Troll?” The goblin with one horn looked at the others. “Doda po mado sleshep.”

The goblin with three horns snorted.

The second nodded his head. He added a few other words I didn’t understand, then looked at me and held out his hand.

I gently took it, and he pulled me to my feet with surprising strength.

I nervously swallowed and let the goblin boys lead me through the darkness of the nighttime forest. One of them pointed at my horns and said something. I didn’t know whether or not he thought the light emanating from them was neat or annoying, but the other two seemed to agree.

Light from fires shone through the trees, and within a few moments, we stepped out from the trees and into the center of a large feast. Small round huts with mossy roofs sat in a circle around a glowing bonfire, and it seemed as though every goblin in the tiny village was gathered around. Children ran about with small axes or maces, yelling in their garbled language while others—I assumed were women due to their long hair and bosoms—tossed things into a large pot on the fire, and those who must have been men helped or cared for the younger children.

A goblin with white hair down the back of his head turned when we stepped out of the trees, saw me, and began scolding the three boys hiding behind my legs.

“Excuse me,” I cut in. “I don’t mean to interrupt. I only need to know the location of the trolls. I was told you could help me.”

The children stopped running, the women stopped preparing their meal, and the men stood—each with a weapon within reach.

I gulped. “Trolls?” I asked again.

“What business have you with trolls?” The elder goblin’s voice was far shriller than I’d anticipated hearing. I also didn’t expect him to speak my

language, considering the children hadn't.

"It's a long story, and I don't have time to waste. Just point me to which path I need to take and I will go. You won't even need to take me there."

"In all my years, I've never seen a magical creature like you. What do you call yourself?"

I hesitated. The children hadn't recognized me, but the old man might if I gave my name. It wasn't something I was going to risk, not being so close. "Fenrir."

I expected to be attacked.

I expected to be eaten.

I didn't expect to be welcomed to the dinner like an old friend. The man led me in and sat me on one of the many stones. The women brought me food. The children ran around and tugged on my dress.

"Stay the night with us!" the old man requested, holding a mug toward me.

I smelled the sweetness of alcohol and the nymph's warning rang in my ears. I'd probably lingered too long as it was. "No, thank you. I'm afraid I should be going. The Dragon Mountains are this way?" I pointed.

A woman sitting nearby shook her head. "That way." She pointed through the little village to a clump of stones and a tiny path between them. "That will take you up to the trolls."

"Be careful," the man offered. "Trolls only come out at night, else they turn into stone. Or so the stories say." He tapped his long, pointed nose with a glint in his eye.

"Thank you for your kindness. If I find a way to repay you, I shall." I rose to my feet.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay tonight?"

I nodded and gave a grateful smile. The group of goblins waved me on my way.

The path started out flat, but it soon grew steeper and steeper until I was climbing sections of it, holding onto the side of the rocks with my fingers and toes. I climbed up to a large, flat stone and stopped to rest, turning my attention to the view. The moon shone brightly amongst a numberless blanket of stars overhead. Clouds rolled along the Drake spine Mountains, and I hoped they weren't thunderclouds. The last thing I needed at that moment was rain to come gushing down on me while I was climbing up to

some troll's hideout.

I couldn't see the witch's house from where I sat but saw the little clan of goblins below and, in the far distance, lights rolling over the hills of Arington. Somewhere in that direction was the sleeping castle filled with everyone I knew and loved.

Heaving a sigh, I got to my feet.

"Hello, girly."

I spun around. "Who is there?" I demanded. I saw no one. My light didn't pierce much of the darkness.

"A curious observer. That is all. What brings you up the cliffs? Do you seek to know your future?" the voice asked. Its owner moved around me in a slow circle, right at the edge of my vision.

"No. I seek the trolls."

"I can tell you your future. I can let you know about your love life, family, finances . . . anything you want."

"No." I headed for the gap in the stone through which I thought the path continued, but it opened into a massive, pitch-black cave.

I halted.

"Come in. Come. I don't bite." The voice chuckled.

Had it not been for the wolf instincts prickling the back of my neck, I believed I might have gone further into the cave to see what the voice wanted. Instead, I stepped away.

"No, no. This way! This way!"

Feet pattered, running toward me, but then around me.

I gasped and stumbled, but quickly found my footing and searched for the sliver of light that led back outside. "I'm sorry. I must go."

"You must stay. Yes, stay."

The feet pattered around me again.

I suddenly realized the voices weren't one, but several. Whatever they were, they were blocking my only exit. I ran for where I thought I had entered, but the light from my horns showed only a solid wall.

"I didn't come this far to be trapped in a cave with shadows!" I ran along the wall, keeping my fingertips on the slimy surface the best I could.

I spotted the exit ahead.

I gasped and ran for it as fast as I could, but before I could reach it, small black shadows descended from the cave ceiling and dove at me. They

pulled my hair, pricked at my face and neck, then my hands when I put my arms up to protect my face.

I burst through the exit, but my feet skidded on the loose stone and slid across the edge of the stone I'd been sitting on just moments ago.

"No!" I cried out, clawing at the stone as I fell. I caught my hands on the edge for a moment.

Hundreds of pairs of little red eyes looked at me through the gap that was the cave entrance, then flew toward me.

I screamed as my fingers lost their grip, and I plunged toward the ground.

Luckily I only fell a few feet before hitting the slope of the mountainside. The momentum of my feet striking the ground launched me into a roll across dirt and small bushes, and I struck my knees and elbows on stone, tree trunks, and who knows what else until I finally stopped in a heap on my side.

Dust floated away from my mouth when I coughed, and I pushed my hair from my face as I sat up.

A fire burned in a wide meadow, and five trolls sat around that fire.

Each stared at me in silence a good handful of seconds before they all grabbed clubs of some kind and got to their feet. They bellowed and stomped, causing the ground to tremble.

I held my ribs with one arm and put my free hand up. "Wait!" I coughed again. "Which one of you is Keltin?"

The troll furthest from me raised his hand slowly. The creature had moss-covered stone-like skin, bottom teeth jutting out in front of its top lip, and it wore only a loincloth.

"Oy, it must be with the sorcerer!"

"Ain't no sorcerer, it was a wizard."

"Nah, he's a goat." They clamored toward me.

I hurried to my feet, catching my foot on my skirt for the millionth time that night, but managed to get near a tree and duck just as a club swung at my head! "It's Ismae!" I shouted.

"Stop!" the troll who had raised his hand demanded. He gave the trolls a shove and stepped between me and them. He turned and looked down at me. "Ismae?" In spite of the trollish drawl, his voice was Keltin's.

I grinned and ran over. I wanted to wrap him in a hug, but my head only reached his waist. "It's me! I came to bring you home!"

“What’s with the horns?”

I heaved a sigh. “It’s a long story. I pricked my finger on a rose and became enchanted into a beast, but I turn back into me when the sun sets, and the entire castle fell into the enchantment too. Everyone is some kind of object or piece of furniture.”

“Even Ulrich?” he asked quickly.

“Uh . . . no. Ulrich was in prison, remember?”

He blinked. “Prison?”

I hesitated. “Erm. At what point did Gerard take you that night?”

“You know Gerard?”

I threw my arms up in the air. “We really don’t have time to go through all of this right now. I need your help to get Gerard so he can turn you back and then get us both back to the castle and remove the spell on everyone, including me.”

Keltin blinked. “Help him from what?”

“The Witch of the Woods caught him.”

“How did you meet the witch?” He stared at me, his eyes wide. “I’ve been in here for days trying to find a way out, and I’ve never seen a sign of her.”

“The forest moves,” one of the other trolls pointed out. He had his finger shoved up his nose.

I gave him a hesitant smile. “Yes. I experienced that by the witch’s hut. Keltin, there really isn’t anything to argue about. Gerard is the *only* way we are getting out of here.”

Keltin studied me as if, well, as if I had horns growing out of my head. He reached out and fixed my hair that had gotten tangled around my horns when I tumbled down the mountain. “I do not trust him.”

“I’m not asking you to. It’s the only way you and I both get fixed.”

He frowned, a look only accentuated by his huge cheeks. “And did he tell you about the stone?”

“Yes, and I promised he could have it.”

“Ismae!”

“Keltin! Do you see any other way of getting us out of this mess? Because I’ve traveled with Gerard for over a week now, and I still see no other way.”

Keltin huffed and finally nodded. “All right. I’m ready to be done here.

Being a troll is awful.”

“I just wish Ulrich could see you now.” I grinned. “I can just picture his face.”

Keltin rolled his eyes. He turned to the trolls. “I must go. I’ll speak with my father about providing homes for you under the bridges again. I’ll do my best, but I offer no promises.” He looked back down at me. “You look exhausted.”

“The nymphs told me not to sleep here.” I sighed heavily and leaned against his side. “You stink.”

“You smell like a dog.”

I smiled. “I missed you. I’ve been really worried about you ever since Gerard told me you were in here. I’m glad the trolls helped to take care of you.”

“Yeah, they aren’t too bad.” He smiled. “Which way to the witch?”

“This way. And just to warn you, the witch mentioned wanting her power back when I ran away earlier today, so she might attack when we get there.”

“You’ve collected quite a bit of danger while I’ve been gone.”

“You have no idea.”



TWENTY

KELTIN GOT A FIRST-HAND LOOK AT MY TRANSFORMATION AND the sun rose. Of course, with the banishment of night came the exhaustion from everything that had happened recently. I curled up in the middle of the path, not wanting to lose it, and closed my eyes.

“Ismae, what are you doing?” Keltin asked, staying as near the shadows as possible. “We have to get as far as we can before the afternoon sun rises. I’ll have a hard time avoiding the sunlight then.”

“I don’t understand that. If the trolls can’t be out in the sun, how is it they lived under the bridges and collected tolls from passersby?” I muttered, already relaxing into sleep.

“Ismae, I don’t understand barking.”

I peeked an eye open. It took far too long for me to process what he’d said and for me to realize I’d used magic to make it so Gerard could understand me. But then, the witch also understood me as a beast, so how was it Keltin couldn’t? And then I remembered the witch had some sort of power to read minds and realized she must have been using that instead of actually understanding me verbally.

Thinking hurt my tired mind, and I closed my eyes again.

“Ismae.” Keltin walked over and scooped me up as if I was just his little puppy. “I’ll carry you, then. How do I know if we’ve met the witch?”

“It’s past the tree and rose nymphs.” I yawned. “There’s a gully, and the hut is at the bottom of it.” I nuzzled his chest.

The next thing I knew, Keltin was shaking me. “Wake up. I think I’m in the right spot,” he whispered.

I peeled my eyes open. Keltin was far faster at walking than I’d realized, and he’d traveled the entire distance back to the witch’s hut in just a day. The sun was already dipping low in the sky, and I was worried I might have to try and face the witch without teeth and claws. Not that they’d been helpful yet.

Keltin set me on the ground, and I took a moment to stretch and orient myself. He looked rather silly with his overgrown teeth, loincloth, and overhanging belly. I wished Ulrich could get a chance to see him.

“What’s the plan?” he asked, leaning down to me.

I didn't have a plan. All I knew was we needed to get into the cottage and find Gerard. Gerard said he could handle the witch, but he clearly hadn't been able to when he'd been captured and tied to a tree. All I could do was hope he had managed to escape and that we weren't returning to our potential deaths.

I shook my head, dismissing all thoughts but keeping my eye on the trees for any signal they were about to come to life. We'd been walking near the tree line to remain somewhat hidden, as we silently approached the cottage as best we could, given Keltin's size.

Once we reached the cottage, Keltin leaned his head down and peered through one of the windows. From what I recalled of the interior, Keltin was gazing into the kitchen.

"I see him. He's tied to a chair. Either he's asleep or unconscious," Keltin whispered. "I hope it's the latter," he added vindictively.

When this was over, I would help him realize the truth about Gerard, but now wasn't the time to fight with my brother.

I propped my front feet up on the wall and managed to peer through the window. The glass was warped, but I could see everything inside. It was clean. Organized. All the broken bookshelves were fixed, the table looked as though it had been polished, and the piles of junk, cobwebs, and dust were now gone.

Gerard sat in a chair near the fireplace, his hands bound behind him with palms together. His shirt was torn, and his head was down. His disheveled hair hid his face.

My heart leapt into my throat.

My ears perked when I once again heard the familiar tune of that eerie lullaby: "Stay away from the woods that weep, from the sounds of tears that run deep. The witch within will devour you whole, and sip a year upon your soul."

Vivian entered the kitchen.

No longer was she hunched over and crippled, but her wrinkles were still prominent, eyes still gray. She stopped in front of Gerard, then grabbed his hair so she could lift his head.

"I've barely taken any of your power, dear boy, and already you're ready to give up? *Tsk.*" Her gaze darted over his face. "If you would stop trying to protect yourself and just let me touch your power, you wouldn't be in so

much pain.” She rubbed her index finger across his forehead, and Gerard groaned.

I looked up at Keltin. With or without his help, I was going to get Gerard now.

I ran to the front of the house, took a deep breath, and positioned myself to sprint at it and break it open—like I’d done back home when I escaped my bedroom.

Keltin held a huge hand out toward me, signaling me to stop. He faced the door, and with a mighty shove, the door exploded open.

I grinned and sprinted between his legs and into the cottage.

“You!” Vivian seethed. She flung a glowing green orb at me, but Keltin gave me a kick in the rear that sent me skidding out of the way. The magic struck the wall and hissed as it bubbled the paint off the wall.

I dug my claws into the wooden floor and ran at the witch. I clamped my fangs on her arm.

The Witch of the Woods screamed.

Chaos erupted.

She tried to cast more magic spells, but I used my size to pull her down.

Keltin clumsily stepped around us and grabbed Gerard.

“You’re ruining everything I had planned!” the witch wailed.

A force blasted from her hands, slamming into my ribs, and I crashed into the wall. Dazed but determined, I shook my head and got back to my feet.

A purple crack shot out across the wooden floor between me and the witch. She gasped and jumped aside, but the wood splintered open as skeletal hands clawed their way out.

“Gerard!” She turned her fuming glare to him.

Gerard’s green eyes seemed to glow. “Selina is going to be furious with you. Ismae, go outside.”

“And leave you in here? No way!” I objected.

“You’re only a wolf and therefore vulnerable,” he replied without looking at me.

“I won’t let her leave.” Vivian bared her teeth as though she were a beast threatening to attack, her missing teeth doing nothing to help her look scarier. “Her magic comes from me, and I want it back.”

Skeletons finally breached the surface of the crack in the floor.

“Is her power a result of you? Or has she had it all along?” Gerard

stepped forward. “Did you think you would be able to suck it out of her? Is that why you stole her as a child?”

The pages of the spellbook on the kitchen table suddenly flipped one after another until finally coming to a stop.

“You know nothing of me!” The witch turned to me and whispered words I couldn’t hear. Vines broke through the wooden floor, then grasped my ankles.

“Of course I do. I was raised by Selina. Remember? Lulla!” All light went out, and Gerard faded away into the shadows.

I felt a massive hand on my shoulder and knew it was Keltin. I was so focused on everything going on around me, I hadn’t realized I’d been returned to my human self.

“Why don’t you listen?” he grumbled. He picked me up and plucked at the vines like they were weeds.

“We can’t leave him here!”

“Seems to me he’s got it pretty under control.” Keltin carried me to the door, but I pushed against him and peered around his shoulder.

“Gerard!” I called.

He appeared behind the old woman.

She spun around, but the instant she used one of her green orbs of magic, Gerard disappeared once more, and she shattered her window. “Show yourself, coward!”

Skeletons with weapons stood silently, waiting for an order.

“Stop this!” The witch wheeled around again, producing another ball of magic that destroyed an entire bookshelf and sent its contents spewing around the room, just like she’d done with the window.

Keltin squeezed through the door and back outside, carrying me with him.

“We can’t leave him!” I repeated as I tried to wiggle free, but even when Keltin set me on my feet, he held fast to my arm.

“He’s worthless to us!”

“No he isn’t! You don’t understand. I—”

Gerard ran out of the house, motioning us to run. “Go! Why are you standing there?”

I heaved a breath of relief. “You scared me! I was going to run back in and help.”

He shook his head and grabbed on to my wrist while running, dragging me to run alongside. "I still haven't figured out if you're brave or daft. Ah!" Gerard cried out.

He yanked me to a halt, and I turned. Gerard was clutching his chest.

"I'm not the only one whose heart Selina has taken," the witch spat. "And you're giving yours willingly." The witch stood in her doorway, her hand balled in a fist, so tight it trembled. "Don't forget the spell I've placed on you, dear boy. It works even from a distance!" A green strand of magic curled and disappeared into Gerard's back. "How ironic, don't you think? The only way to break my spell on you is the same way the girl must free herself. Selina gave you until the last petal falls before she comes to obtain the stone herself? When that last petal falls, your heart will be mine unless you find someone to love and who will love you as the monster you are."

"You dare invoke her wrath?" Gerard gritted his teeth and glared at her, his shoulders rising and falling in short, pained movements with his breath.

The witch smirked. "I'll take my chances, necromancer. She can't kill me now or she loses your heart."

"You can't . . . take it this way!" he shouted.

"You were mistaken." She cackled. "The first seed has been planted, poison by my own hand, and when the last petal of that rose touches the ground, you will be mine. Take your undead and leave."

Gerard's lip twitched. The skeletons had been keeping a distance, clearly at his will because, with a movement of his fingers, they marched toward the witch.

"You wouldn't dare! Your curse will still hold!" she snapped. "There will be no escape for you!"

"If you can't fulfill the curse, Selina will, and she's almost taken my heart anyhow." Gerard turned his hand palm-down and the skeletons attacked the witch. As he turned us away from the scene, he readjusted his hold on me to hold my hand instead of my wrist and started walking without looking back.

The witch behind us screamed incantations, and bursts of green light filled the air.

I turned to Gerard.

"It's nothing," he mumbled, still rubbing his chest. But his brows were pinched with worry, his jaw set with anger, and I knew whatever spell the witch had cast on him must have been powerful to worry him so.

“I found Keltin,” I said, knowing Gerard wouldn’t tell me anything if I pushed too hard. The last thing I wanted at that moment was to make him angry with me.

“I see that.”

“How do we get the spell off him?” I asked.

“Let’s get a little farther away.” He nodded at me.

I squeezed his hand. “I came back for you. I wasn’t going to leave you with her.”

Gerard nodded.

We didn’t stop until we reached the edge of the swamp. Gerard dropped his pack on the ground, then knelt to rummage through it. He unfolded a piece of paper he’d found inside as he stood in front of Keltin. After a short incantation, a purple light glowed from the top of the troll’s head to his toes, and as the light moved downward, Keltin’s real form took shape.

I jumped and threw my arms around Keltin’s neck. “You’re back!”

He sighed in relief and squeezed me. “Thank the trees.”

Gerard dropped the parchment to the ground. It crumpled and turned black. “Let us be on our way. I’m exhausted.” He ran his fingers through his hair, smoothing it somewhat, but he looked like he needed some rest.

Keltin’s jaw flexed. “You turned Ismae into a beast.”

“She wouldn’t give me the autumn stone.” He shrugged and took his pack.

Keltin grabbed Gerard by the arm, spinning him around.

Gerard moved with the turn, grabbed the back of Keltin’s shirt, and flung him to the ground. “Do *not* touch me.”

Keltin gasped for breath.

“You’re still recovering from the transformation and are too weak to try and fight me.”

“I wasn’t . . . trying to fight you!” Keltin coughed and rolled to his knees.

“Then what were you doing?”

Keltin glared at him. “I was going to ask what you did with Ulrich.”

Gerard rolled his eyes. “You should ask Ismae about that. But considering he’s the only one from the autumn ball who wasn’t present when the enchantment took hold, I would assume he ran off. More than likely, by the time we get back to your castle, he will be there with his own small army. Hopefully, he doesn’t bring Athena with him. That is if they’ve found a way

to get her back from being a fish.” He wiggled his arms through his straps, adjusting his bag on his back.

“How do you know about . . .” Keltin rolled his eyes. “Of course. You took the summer stone. Ulrich said he suspected you’d taken it.”

“Odette suspected,” Gerard corrected. “We need to get to a weakness in the barrier so we can get out.” He looked down at me. “Otherwise I should have left you on the other side. Keltin has no traces of magic. He’ll be able to walk through the barrier.”

Keltin put his hand on my back. “Are you all right? Did he hurt you?”

I shook my head. “He wouldn’t.”

Keltin didn’t look like he believed me.

Gerard hadn’t hurt me, but his entire demeanor changed with Keltin being there. In fact, Gerard didn’t say a single word the entire time we walked through the swamp. When we reached the safety of the other side, he began walking eastward. Every now and then, he would glance down at the trail of flowers.

Keltin took the chance to tell me all about how he’d ended up a troll. “The night of the autumn ball, Ulrich was acting standoffish. He wouldn’t dance with me. When I confronted him about it, he said he was nervous about what the others would say and do. People in his kingdom still didn’t know because the only ones who saw us kiss at the summer celebration were those sitting closest to us.” Keltin climbed over a wide tree that had fallen over the path.

I easily hopped over it.

“He said he didn’t want to make others uncomfortable. I asked him what he wanted, and if he . . . if he even wanted to continue our relationship.” His eyes scrunched as he surveyed the ground. “We just barely started our relationship, and I ruined it already. That guy”—he pointed to Gerard—“took Ulrich’s form and lured me out of the castle. He said he wanted to talk alone. You know what he did? He tied me up and demanded to know where the autumn stone was. Then he dragged me out here to the Weeping Woods and told me if I didn’t tell him where the stone was, I would never see any of my family again.”

I looked at Gerard, but it was as if Gerard couldn’t even hear us. He paused to examine the broken branch of a bush on the side of the path and then reached his finger out to trace something on the ground before

straightening and continuing.

Keltin carried on. "I told him I wasn't allowed to hold possession of the stone, because I hadn't earned my authority yet to begin running things in the kingdom. So he turned me into a troll and shoved me across the barrier. I've been trying to get out for days."

"That's quite the story," I said.

"You seem unimpressed."

My focus was on Gerard.

Gerard stopped.

Keltin walked right on down the path and past the tree line and out of the Weeping Woods with no problem. He turned to us. "It appears the spell was completely removed after all." He gazed down at his hands and turned them over. "What about you two?"

Gerard looked around as if able to see the invisible barrier. "I suppose now I see what happens when I try and cross through." He walked with less confidence than Keltin. Just before reaching the tree line, there was a crack like lightning. Gerard was thrown back into the trees.

"Gerard!" I ran after him and found him crawling out of a pile of bushes, wincing.

"My leg still isn't properly healed," he explained. "That certainly didn't help."

I leaned down, then reached out to touch his face. "Are you—"

He pushed my hand away. "I'm just fine."

I glared at him.

Gerard lifted his eyes to me. "I promise, I'll be okay."

I stared him down. "Will you stop whatever it is you're doing? I leave you for one night to get Keltin and you suddenly hate me?"

"Fine." He put his arm around my neck, and I pulled him to his feet. He hissed through his teeth but finally balanced himself. "Why do you help me, even after what your brother told you?" His eyes searched my gaze.

"Because I don't believe a thing that witch said, and I think your heart is going to be just fine because she couldn't have possibly done a spell powerful enough to do what she claimed. Besides, if Selina started the process of taking your heart, how could this woman come and take it all?"

Gerard shook his head. "She's actually extremely powerful, Ismae. And she is draining my power with this . . . spell. It leeches my magic. That's

how she gained enough power to fix up her house.”

“Then. Selina is more powerful, isn’t she? She’ll be able to break it.”

“Spells with stipulation can’t just be broken.”

I raised my brow.

“Like your enchantment. I . . . actually can’t break it.”

“What?” I dropped his arm and turned to face him.

He sighed. “It’s got a stipulation. The only way for you to break the enchantment is if you find someone to love and who will love you in return.”

I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to respond. He knew my history with loving others, trusting others, and here he was just adding to the list of reasons why I hated other people.

Gerard cleared his throat and turned his attention to assess the magic wall that wasn’t there. “I could try using a shield to get through, but I don’t know if this will read the shield as magic and still kick us back or if it will reflect the magic.” He started walking away from Keltin, following the tree line. He chewed his bottom lip and looked at me. “I bound your enchantment to the rose. Without it, I can’t release you from the spell, which means I can’t make you a non-magical creature so you can walk through the barrier.”

My heart sunk.

“I could run back to the castle,” Keltin offered immediately. “One of the farmers would allow me to borrow a horse.”

“Even then, it would be days before you returned, and we don’t have time on our side.” Gerard ran his fingers through his hair.

I got an idea. “Wait. I think I know what to do.”

Gerard looked at me, hopelessness in his eyes, though the rest of his face succeeded at remaining stoic.

“That person who opened the barrier. Wouldn’t that have weakened the barrier in that location?”

Gerard’s brows lifted. “That . . . could very well be. You’re brilliant, Ismae!” Gerard grinned and tried to run, only to wince as he limped.

“Care to explain?” Keltin asked while journeying on the other side of the barrier.

“A couple of nights ago, the barrier was breached. There must be a weak spot in it, and that’s where we are headed. Ismae, I recommend you use

whatever wolf senses you've been given to make sure we aren't in danger. If creatures know there is a weakness in the barrier, they are likely gathered near, waiting for it to break again."



TWENTY-ONE

GERARD WAS RIGHT.

A few minutes later, my wolf senses picked up new smells—mud and filth from the swamp.

“Gerard,” I whispered, cuing him to slow his pace as well.

He put his hand on my back and leaned toward me. His leg must have still been giving him pain.

I crept up to a bush and peered around. A path wound from between the trees and seemingly stopped at the barrier. If the path continued on, it was overgrown and completely invisible to me. A flapping noise drew my attention to the branches above my head. A giant bat adjusted itself in the darkness of the branches. I gulped.

Gerard crouched at my side, holding his left leg out a bit. “Perhaps we should wait until dawn. Those in the shadows will remain in the shadows. They are safe there. I see a few others keeping their distance, but they seem to be lesser magical creatures. Less dangerous.”

As he spoke, I spotted a butterfly with a human body, a beautiful fairy girl. She sat on the lip of a flower, staring longingly at the land beyond. I wondered what she was thinking of. Was she dreaming of a world that would accept her magic, provide her freedom? Was she like me, wanting to have a voice in the world but stifled because of rules someone else had made? Because of people like me who despised magic for reasons not even I understood?

I turned my attention to Gerard. “I don’t think we should wait. I want to get out now. I want to go home and be done with this adventure.”

Gerard studied me before turning his attention away. “I disagree. The witch takes more of my power every time I use magic. If I try and get us out using magic, I’m afraid we may not make it. I would have to open a portal into the underworld, navigate us through, and open a new portal to get us out. That’s a significant amount of magic. But if we show ourselves, these creatures will attack.”

“You control shadows, wouldn’t they just listen to you?”

“It’s not . . .” He sighed. “It’s not that simple.”

“What if I used my magic to make us invisible?”

He hesitated. "Ismae, you don't know how to control your magic."

I threw my arms up. "Then what do you suggest?"

He flinched and looked into the shadows. "I recommend not giving away our position. We have a few more hours until the sun rises. Can we just wait until then?"

I tightened my lips, but relaxed and sighed. "Fine."

Keltin stood awkwardly several feet away. "So, I'm supposed to just sit here while you wait for the sun to come up?" He sighed and folded his arms. "I would rather get a head start."

"Why don't you do that?" Gerard snapped.

I looked between them. "What is the deal with you two? Honestly?"

"Great," Gerard muttered, rising from our hiding place. "The shadows already know we're here."

His movement caught the attention of all creatures waiting by the entrance. He pretended not to notice and dragged his fingers across the barrier, which sparked yellow and white. His hand finally stopped at a space near the bottom of the barrier, and he looked to me with a smile.

I walked over to him.

"This is the weakest point. I believe I may be able to unravel it but only for a moment. Be prepared to run as fast as possible," he whispered.

The fairy with the butterfly wings alighted onto my shoulder. I didn't mind. One fairy escaping was no concern of mine.

He extended his hand out, palm down, and whispered before pushing that hand through the barrier slowly. The soft, icy groan echoed around us, but his hand went through. At the same time his hand pierced the barrier, he gasped and clutched his chest and recoiled.

"The spell?" I quickly asked.

He nodded, rubbing his chest furiously. "I've got to get us out of here. I can do this."

I took his hand. "Don't push yourself too hard."

He followed the same movements he did before, but when his hand pierced the barrier the second time, he drew it upward, visibly splitting a line with a white edge in the air. His breath became ragged and his words hesitated. "I . . . have no . . . choice."

Once the gap was large enough, I darted through and then back spun around to check on Gerard.

He was trembling, trying to take a step, but sweat beaded his brow, and behind him, an army of darkness swarmed toward the exit.

I grabbed Gerard's shirt and dragged him through the hole. It snapped shut with a loud *crack*, and the creatures still trapped screamed in anger.

Gerard collapsed into me.

I wrapped my arms around his chest and held on as we both sunk to our knees. "Hey. Hey, I'm right here. You're okay."

Keltin walked over. "You should have just left him."

I growled at him, even flashing my teeth.

Keltin's brows slowly met in a look that told me he was realizing something, but he didn't speak.

Gerard was on his knees, still holding his chest, and breathing as though he'd just run for his life. His face was pale, and his pupils were dilated.

"Come on, Ismae. We can get back to the castle before he comes to. We can figure out how to get you to your true shape and then figure out how to use the autumn stone to lift the rest of the enchantment on the castle." Keltin put his hand on my shoulder and tried to get me to leave Gerard.

"I'm not leaving him, Keltin. If you want to go, then do it!"

"You honestly want to help him? Why? What good has he done for you?"

Gerard hadn't done much good at all except being the first person to try and connect with me. He was the first person to ask questions about how I felt and why. The first person to make me feel . . . not so alone.

I looked down at the boy I'd once despised.

I'd pitied myself for being lonely. I'd always felt like I was misunderstood in the world. I'd been jealous of Ulrich because I'd thought we had something special, I was envious of Elisa for finally finding her place, and I'd despised Mathias's confidence, not to mention Tavia's brains and beauty. And for Keltin? I'd always been envious of his status, that he was the eldest and had a choice in every matter of his life.

I thought I had it worse than anyone in the world.

Until I met Gerard.

A young warlock or wizard—whatever he called himself—trapped under the thumb of a powerful sorceress. I thought I had no choices, but Gerard? The only choice he had was how quickly to obey. He had no real family, and I knew he had no time to find a hobby. Everything he did was to satisfy Selina's orders.

If anyone needed someone to lean on so he wasn't alone in the world, it was Gerard. And I wasn't going to leave him. Not like this.

"You can . . . go," he panted.

"Shut it." I pulled his arm across my shoulders as I'd done after his leg was broken, and he leaned on me so I could haul him to his feet like we before.

The fairy that had been on my shoulder fluttered over and hovered in front of Gerard's face. She spoke in a shrill voice. "You are hurting. I can help."

Gerard lifted his bloodshot gaze to her. "For what price?"

"Repay me." She placed her hand on his nose. "I will see you again, Gerard." With that, she flew over his head, sprinkling his head and shoulders with silver fairy dust.

I watched her fly away and adjusted my grip on Gerard. "What was that?"

"It helped relieve the pain a little."

Keltin snorted and went to Gerard's other side and helped lift him.

"Thank you," Gerard whispered, giving me a weak smile as he met my gaze. Then, through gritted teeth, he said, "You know, the forest could have been worse. The trees could have moved."

Keltin eyed him. "Do the trees in Ashwrya move?"

He nodded. "Whole forests of them."

I opened my mouth to tell him the trees had chased me, but we could catch up on those stories later. "I think we should go back to the farmhouse and get some help. Rest there for the night." The farmhouse stood not far off, and I knew the man owed us for keeping him and his daughters safe.

Gerard nodded.

Once we reached the farmhouse, Keltin knocked on the front door and stepped to the side. He fidgeted with the loincloth about his waist, cheeks slowly growing red. "I can't believe they will meet me in this manner," he grumbled. "Crown prince."

"At least they didn't meet you as a beast," I said.

The door creaked open, and the husband's face appeared in the gap.

"What is it, sweetheart?" a woman's voice asked.

Gerard and I exchanged a glance. A woman's voice? There hadn't been a woman a couple of days ago.

The man cleared his throat. His gaze settled on Gerard. "You are the one who protected us when the barrier was breached."

Gerard nodded. "I need somewhere safe to rest a little while."

The man hesitated. He spotted Keltin and glanced over his shoulder. "Perhaps . . . the barn." He slipped out the door, closing it behind him. He bowed to Keltin. "Your highness."

"You're going to make me stay in a barn?" Keltin asked. "What is it you hide?"

"Not now, Keltin," Gerard muttered. "The barn is fine."

I reached out and smacked Keltin.

"Nothing," the man said, but his body language spoke for him. He glanced nervously at his home, at the window, and back to the crown prince of Arington. "It's nothing."

"Did the shadows return?" Gerard asked, voice low.

"No. No, that isn't it." The man gave a nervous laugh. "I promise. The girls have just made a mess of things, and I haven't time to clean up."

He started walking toward the barn. "I do have a spare stall."

I looked over my shoulder at the house and spotted the curtains move, and eyes that had been watching us disappeared.

"Sir, if I may," I started. "We need a fire and medicine. If we start a fire in your barn, the chances of it igniting and burning the entire thing down are very high, which means you will lose your livestock," I pressed. "Please."

The man hesitated. "But—"

"My love, let them in."

We all turned to see a stunningly beautiful woman standing at the corner of the house.

The wife. I recognized her from the picture on the mantel. She was supposed to be trapped behind the barrier. Yet there she stood, her blond hair flowing in the gentle breeze.

Her piercing blue gaze moved to us, and she gave us a beautiful smile. "Please come in. I'm afraid Robert isn't used to having guests." She turned back to the house, and we followed her inside.

I helped Gerard collapse against the wall near the fireplace, then knelt beside him. "Where are you hurting?" I whispered.

"Everywhere. It's . . . the spell. But I don't understand . . ." He let out a heavy breath and closed his eyes.

The woman crouched in front of him and reached her hand out. "May I?" Gerard peeled his eyes open and gave her a slight nod of his head.

She reached her hand out, placing it nearly on his face, but stopping a safe distance away. "You met the Witch of the Woods."

"Yes," Gerard answered.

The woman lowered her hand and tucked her hair behind her pointed ear.

"The stories about the witch are nearly right, but many leave out important details." She looked up at me. "You are Princess Ismae?"

I nodded hesitantly.

She smiled. "The witch did take children, and as you know, you were one of them, but she only took those who seemed to possess magic themselves." She folded the apron she wore and then lifted the small pot of water from the flames to set it on the hearth. "She didn't only kill the children but drained them of their magic." She looked at Gerard. "Essentially, she's attached a magical leech to you, young man."

"Gerard."

She smiled. "I'm Mayashel."

Gerard adjusted the way he sat. "How do you know all of this?"

"Robert and I have lived here many years, including through the time of the children being snatched, and being this close to the woods, we've heard many things." She got to her feet. "The spell she has on you is truly the only reason she has any power at all. She steals it from others. As she's been starved of magic, she's grown old and weary. Even I can sense your power. You are very strong and have a lot to give her."

"I didn't feel anything until—"

"You cast a spell?" Mayashel gave him a half-smile with sadness in her eyes. "I can give you something to help provide energy, but I'm afraid I don't have the power required to break the spell she's placed on you." She walked to the window in the kitchen and began going through the small containers on the windowsill.

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Not once had I imagined people with families being separated. I looked at the paintings hanging on the wall. The red, yellow, and blue paints had been made from crushed berries and flowers, and both pictures depicted the little girls with their mother. They'd been separated from their mother because a witch was power-hungry.

No.

Because of my father's law.

How many other families had been pulled apart because of it?

My brows met. "Wait. My father commanded all magical creatures be trapped in the woods."

Gerard looked at me while Mayashel assessed his leg. "What are you thinking?"

"The witch claimed she only took children who had power. If my father took all of those with power and trapped them with her . . ."

Mayashel lifted her gaze to me.

"Did he trap them all in there so she could have an endless supply? Was that the trade-off to get me home?" I looked to Keltin and rose to my feet. "Is that what Father did?"

Keltin shook his head. "The barrier is recent, Ismae. Just last year, remember?"

I closed my eyes. Of course. That was right. Father hadn't trapped magical creatures here to give Vivian fuel to feed her lust for magic.

Mayashel interrupted my thoughts. "Gerard, you cannot cast any spells until you can dispel this curse. Your power will drain much faster every time you use it."

"I know. But how am I supposed to get this magic leech off me?"

"Did she tell you anything?"

Gerard's jaw flexed. "I have to find someone to love me." He scoffed and looked away.

The fae woman poured her concoction of herbs into the pot. "My magic is different. It is a gift of the earth. I know nothing of dark magic other than it is a horrible path that will *always* lead to death and destruction." She raised her brows at him. "You are still young. You have a chance to change before your path is solidified."

Gerard absently ran his hand up and down his leg.

Mayashel took me by the elbow. "Help me fetch some herbs."

I accepted the small basket from her and walked outside to a cluster of raspberry bushes standing at the side of the house.

"Your friend has a lot of darkness in his heart," she said to me, her voice hushed.

"I know."

"But I meant what I said about him having a chance to change."

“Are you certain? The witch said Selina had his heart.”

Mayashel plucked a raspberry from the bush. “Anyone can change. Even a princess who is rumored to be coldhearted herself.” She gave a hint of a smile. “You don’t seem like the woman I’ve heard rumors about.”

I shook my head. “Can someone truly change in only a few days?”

“If they’ve been given reason to.”

“How am I supposed to help him?” I finally asked aloud. “I barely know him.”

“I think you know him better than you realize.” Mayashel offered me a tender smile and gestured to the front of the house. “I’m afraid we don’t have enough beds for all of you, but Robert is moving the girls into our room, and their bed should be big enough for you and Keltin to share. I can pull out some bread, orange marmalade, and dried meat.”

I found it odd we were outside in the middle of the night picking raspberries. Me? Help Gerard? A necromancer who’d lived his entire life using magic? There was no denying I’d developed . . . feelings for him. He could never reciprocate that toward me. I annoyed him. Didn’t I?



TWENTY-TWO

I SAT AT GERARD'S SIDE ON THE FLOOR WHILE WE ATE. Kelt table, speaking with Robert and Mayashel about their farm. Gerard's empty plate rested on his lap and he stared at nothing in particular, eyelids heavy with exhaustion.

He must have noticed me watching him because he offered a hint of a smile and looked over. "I was thinking about how close you are to everything going back to normal."

"Normal?" I shook my head. "We can't go back to how things were. We need to send people into the Weeping Woods to find those creatures who are good and let them out. We need to rebuild Cornesh. We need to change our laws about magic."

"Hm." The corner of Gerard's lips lifted. "It's odd to think just a few days ago you looked down on peasants."

I pulled my knees to my chest. "I can't imagine having to live like this, in a hut with barely enough blankets to stay warm, wearing the same clothing every day, eating such a meager meal, yet being completely willing to share it all."

"And?" Gerard prodded.

I looked at him, smiling. "They're so happy. They have barely anything, but they have their mother back, and that's enough for them." I put my head on his shoulder and felt him stiffen. "I think I've been very closed off. I pretend to let people in, pretend to be friends, but I realize you were right all this time. I don't really have anyone who understands how I feel. I'm trying to be the princess my parents expect of me while fighting against it."

"I have the opposite problem."

I reached down and lifted his hand to look at it in the candlelight. "What do you mean?"

"I have a birthright I've been fighting for my entire life. Now? I'm not sure I want it."

I lifted my head and looked at Gerard.

"I've been trying so long to prove myself to Selina, just like you've been fighting your whole life to prove yourself to your family and kingdom. I'm . . . tired of it."

“Is that why you need the autumn stone?”

He nodded, eyes on my hand as I traced the lines in his palm.

“You’re so close. Why give it up?”

He lifted his gaze to me. “Because there’s a certain someone who keeps holding me back.” He winked, his relaxed smile back on his face like when it was just us.

I smiled.

“Princess,” Mayashel said. “You and Prince Keltin are welcome to share the girls’ room.”

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” Keltin immediately said. “I don’t mind. They have blankets.”

I nodded. “I’ll be in, in a while.”

Robert left a candle for Gerard and me before leaving us alone.

Keltin hesitated. “Are you coming, Issy?”

“In a few minutes.”

His gaze darted to me holding Gerard’s hand.

Gerard pulled his away.

I reached out and quickly took it again, giving him a firm look before turning back to my brother. “In a few minutes,” I repeated.

“All right.” He held his hands up, then left.

“What is it you wanted to talk about with no one here?” Gerard asked.

I shifted so I sat sideways. “I want to know more about you, Gerard. I want to know about your childhood, your magic! I . . . want to learn how to be a good friend.”

He scoffed. “Well, I wouldn’t know what that’s like.”

“Then you can learn too.” I grinned. “We can figure it out, right? A mighty sorcerer and a mutt princess.”

Gerard put his hand on my cheek.

My heart jumped into my throat.

“You’re not a mutt. Mutts are dogs, and you are no dog.” His gaze searched my face, and he lowered his hand. “Besides, I’m not a sorcerer either.” He shrugged a shoulder. “I’m a warlock.”

I composed myself by swallowing and taking a breath. “What’s the difference?”

“Sorceresses are women with magic. Witches are women who use magic who turn dark and sink to using blood magic or other means to get their

powers. A sorcerer . . .” He tilted his head. “We don’t have sorcerers here. They’re relatively powerful, but their power isn’t from them directly. They get their power from artifacts and enchantments. A wizard is powerful in the light magic, and a warlock is powerful in the dark magic.”

“So tell me what light and dark magic are. Why did Mayashel try and tell you that you have time to change?”

“She is right that most people who use dark magic end up dying very tragically, go mad, or get killed by others. But wizards die of the same things.” He stretched with a groan. “I don’t see any harm in what I do. Spending a lot of time in the shadow realm, I know a thing or two about darkness. That is also why I was able to sense that creature the night the barrier was breached, I’ve felt it before. It’s why I didn’t want to tempt the shadow creatures when we left.”

He slid his arm around my shoulders.

I didn’t want to ask questions. I didn’t want to speak at all. I was afraid if I moved, Gerard would lower his arm, and being up against his side, feeling the muscles of his body . . . I wished I could stop time.

But I wanted to talk to him so much.

“Why don’t you have friends?”

I felt him shrug. “Because you never know who to trust where I’m from. Selina has saved my life on two separate occasions, not to mention how her own sisters turned against her.” He lowered his arm and began rummaging through his pack for his blanket.

“Would . . . you consider me a friend?”

Gerard’s green eyes reflected the firelight. The silence between us grew, and my stomach sunk with each passing moment. He broke it by scooting forward so he could lie down. “Of course not,” he said. He rolled to his side, putting his back to me.

My breath caught. After everything we’d been through that week, sharing deep, personal thoughts with each other, he turned his back to me? Why would he push me away now?

I got to my feet. “Well, then. I suppose I should leave you be.”

“Ismae.”

“Don’t let the shadows eat you,” I snipped.

“Ismae,” Gerard tried again. I heard him trying to get to his feet.

I walked to the small bedroom, tears in my eyes, and closed it a little too

loudly.

Keltin looked up at me from his position on the floor. “You two seem pretty close.”

“Apparently not as much as I thought.” I stormed past him and climbed into the pathetic bed. “It’s just that . . . I thought . . .” I wiped at the tears. “We’ve been through a lot these past several days. I was foolish to think he would like me.”

Keltin’s arms were suddenly around me. He desperately needed a bath, but he was my brother and we hadn’t had a chance yet to properly apologize to each other or even greet each other.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I am too.” I sniffled. “I’m sorry I was so mean to you and Ulrich. I’m sorry that I always push people away, that I got the entire castle put under an enchantment, and that we have to give up the royal stone to a boy none of us know. This is all my fault.”

“What are you talking about? Ismae, you didn’t do any of this.”

“Yes I did! If I wasn’t such a . . . a brat, Gerard wouldn’t have gone after me and put the enchantment on us and . . . and . . .” I held on to Keltin. My head pounded. I wanted to sleep, but more than anything I wanted the wolf curse gone.

“Ismae, you’re not a brat. I wish you could see how much we all love you.” He let go and handed me a handkerchief from the nightstand.

I raised my eyebrows, wiping my eyes, but I was *not* about to use someone else’s handkerchief. “No, thank you.”

He cleared his throat and set the handkerchief back down. “Why did things change?” He sat beside me on the bed and stared at the wall. “You’ve been so . . . different the past couple of years. You used to always be easy going, fun. And then . . . that all changed. Long before Ulrich and I.”

“They changed because Mother and Father began teaching me to be someone’s wife instead of the queen I wanted to be,” I answered, aware of the coldness to my tone. “I don’t want to be married off. I don’t want people to view me as an object of trade, to bring the countries closer together or whatever plan they have. I want choices.”

“Considering Mathias is the only one of us available, I fail to see what other choices you have,” Keltin said plainly.

I looked up at him. “And what of Ashwrya?”

“The barbarians?” He laughed.

“There are isles to the south, lands across the sea.” I shrugged. “Or no marriage at all! I’m still young! I don’t need to be married yet!”

Keltin scratched his chin. “And who will Mathias marry?”

“Give him Odette. She might keep him in line.”

Keltin chuckled. “She has James.”

I knew Odette was in a relationship, but why did it have to be up to me to make everyone else happy? Why couldn’t I just be me?

“We passed through Cornesh.” I wanted to change the subject away from me, and if Gerard didn’t hold up his end of the arrangement to save me from this wretched beast, I needed to tell Keltin while I had the chance.

“What of it?”

“Did you know Father hasn’t rebuilt it?” I looked over at him.

He sighed. “I did.”

“And why not?”

He shook his head. “The nearby towns took in the villagers who lived there.”

“So they live in makeshift shelters while we feast in the castle?”

His brow twitched. “Since when did you begin caring about the peasants?”

I huffed. “Why does that matter? All that matters is that we need to get those homes rebuilt so these people have somewhere to live. Why hasn’t anyone done anything?”

He scratched his head. “Because it’s a logistical nightmare. There are arguments over who should pay for all the labor. The man who was the leader of Cornesh wants the kingdom to pay, while advisors think Cornesh should.”

I rolled my eyes and threw my arms up in the air. “You’ve got to be kidding! There are mountains right there!” Rising to my feet, I gestured with both arms. “What do we have to pay for? Have the men and women of Cornesh hew the stones from the mountains.”

“They aren’t stonemasons. You can’t just walk up to a mountain and chisel away the boulders.”

“Why not? Have them haul the stones into Cornesh and those who *are* masons can begin shaping those stones into whatever shape they need to rebuild.” I put my hands on my hips. “Certainly, they would take pride in

rebuilding their own city.”

Keltin’s lips played with a smile while he shook his head. “You would think. But they feel they should be compensated for their troubles, for those who died in the attack a year or so ago.”

I rolled my eyes. “Then compensate them. Give them some money, give them a task, and rebuild Cornesh.”

“We need to get back to the castle first.” Keltin stood. “And get everyone unenchanted.”

I sighed. “I suppose.” I looked at the door.

“You hesitate.”

My thoughts had once again gone to Gerard. “We should help him.”

“Gerard? How?”

I shook my head and shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s all alone, Keltin. He has no real family, and his only guidance comes from a power-hungry sorceress.”

“Perhaps we could offer him a position in the castle? Page boy?”

I gave Keltin a blank look.

“That was funny!” He laughed and hugged me again. “You need to loosen up, little sis. Things will be put back to normal, and we’ll figure out what to do with Gerard.”

I pushed him away. “Good. Get off, you stink. Really.”

“Ouch. You’re one to talk. At least I don’t smell like a wet dog.”

I gasped and punched him in the shoulder.

Keltin stifled a laugh.

I smiled.

As I got in the bed and hunkered down for the night, I couldn’t get my thoughts off Gerard. I was under the impression we had become friends, yet he’d pushed me away. The memory of that stung and sat heavy in my mind the rest of the night.



TWENTY-THREE

I FINISHED MAKING THE BED WHILE THE SKY SHIFTED FROM purple. Time always seemed to pass too quickly for me. In a few minutes, the sun would be up, and I would be a wolf again. I scrubbed my face and hands clean in the wash bin before joining Mayashel in the kitchen to see if I could help with breakfast.

Gerard stood at the woman's side, cutting up vegetables while Mayashel rinsed another potato. I didn't know how he sensed my presence, but Gerard turned his head to look over his shoulder the instant I stepped into the room. He offered me a weak smile, as though apologizing.

I had two choices at that moment: forgive him or hold it over his head. Normally I would hold it over his head. I'd considered him a friend, and he'd turned his back to me. But I'd also thought about it all night, and if he really was as similar to me as he claimed, he was pushing me away because it was inevitable we would be separated anyway. Why get close to someone if they're just going to leave?

I walked to his side.

He drew a breath and held it.

"Keltin and I spoke last night." I fiddled with the peel of a potato on the counter beside the cutting board before looking into Gerard's mesmerizing eyes.

"Oh?"

"How would you like a position in the castle?"

He blanched and looked quickly at Mayashel, then back to me. "What?"

"I forgot the milk for the cream. I'll be back," Mayashel said, quickly dismissing herself and leaving out the front door.

I spotted the jar of milk already collected and sitting on the counter.

"You want me to stay in the castle?" Gerard asked.

I shrugged. "You deserve a chance at a life not under the thumb of the sorceress."

Gerard looked down at the half-diced potato and slowly pressed the knife to make more slices. "It isn't that simple, Ismae," he answered softly. "I can't just leave."

"And why not?"

“Why don’t you leave your position of being a princess? Journey with me to Ashwrya and see it with your own eyes.” He looked at me intensely.

“I . . . I can’t just do that. I have responsibilities.”

He raised his brows.

“Oh.” I drew a breath and let it out by blowing a raspberry. I offered him a little smile. “I’ve always wanted to see Ashwrya, you know.”

“It’s rather beautiful. Cold, but beautiful.” He gave me a hesitant grin.

“I know you push me away because you don’t want to let me get too close.”

Gerard went back to work, chopping the rest of the potato while I stared him down. He scooted the cut potatoes into the pan with already cut peppers and onions. “I am not here to make friends.”

“No. But one fell in your trap. Quite literally.”

He chuckled, and my grin spread. I loved the sound of his laugh. It was rare but brought so much light to his face. He glanced at me. “You’re trying really hard, you know.”

I held my hand out. “Let me do it.”

“Cut the potatoes? Why?”

“Because Keltin couldn’t believe I was concerned about the people of Cornesh. Imagine his face when he walks in and I’m cutting up potatoes.”

Gerard laughed out loud this time and handed me the knife. “It’s just like when we were in the castle.”

“I think I’ve forgotten.”

He looked down at me, the smile at the edge of his mouth telling me he knew I hadn’t forgotten. And the glint in his eye said that he knew I really wanted to feel his arms around me. Luckily for me, he complied. My heart melted when he stepped up behind me and slid his hand over mine, his other arm wrapping around me to hold the potato.

“Why do you intrigue me so?” he whispered in my ear.

I turned my head and looked up at him. “Everyone needs someone, Gerard.” I didn’t want to push any further. I didn’t dare say he was my someone, or that maybe I was his too. If I spoke those words out loud, Gerard could run back to the castle without us and leave me forever.

“Careful with the horns. You might poke my eye out,” he teased, nudging my horn with his chin, which moved my head a little.

His free hand slid up my arm, then moved to my chin and tenderly turned

it to face him. My heart raced. Our lips were mere inches from each other. I started to rise to my toes, silently asking him to lower his lips to mine.

It should have happened.

I should have tasted his lips, felt their softness, felt his breath upon my face, connected with him on a deeper level than ever before.

Instead, I gasped as a ripple of numbness began to tingle through me.

Concern quickly crossed Gerard's face as he held me. "What is it?"

"The transformation." Tears stung my eyes, and I let my arms fall.

He looked me up and down, slowly releasing me from his tender hold. He said nothing but stepped back to allow me to fall to my hands and knees while fur covered my body, my bones reshaped, and I was no longer the beautiful young princess I was at heart.

"I'm sorry," he said when all was done. He crouched and cupped my face. "If we can get some horses, I believe we might be able to make it back to the castle by nightfall, and then this enchantment will be lifted. I promise."

He kissed the top of my head and hope ignited in my chest.

His promise was good enough for me.

Mayashel jumped when she came in and first spotted me. "I haven't seen you as a beast yet. Keltin told us." She came in empty-handed. "Let's get the food on the stove, yes?"

I had to sit back and watch them work. It was the first time in my life I genuinely wanted to help, whether that was setting the table or helping clean up after. Robert had been kind enough to provide Keltin with a set of clothing, which all of us were grateful for so he didn't have to run around practically naked. Though, I wondered if it would have bothered Ulrich at all.

Keltin shook their hands and bowed. "Thank you for opening your home to us. I'll make sure my father hears of how helpful you were and reward you."

"We don't need a reward," Robert said. "Having my wife home is good enough." He smiled and slid his arm around her. "I would prefer to have my daughters and wife stay with me here, not in the Weeping Woods. That is good enough."

Keltin smiled. "I'll make sure that happens." He nodded and put his hand on my head. "Thank you, again."

The three of us traveled through the open fields, past Cornesh, and on to Bertold. It was there I saw the first glimpse of what Keltin had meant about the nearby towns taking in the people from Cornesh. Bertold had once been just another small town in Arington, but it seemed to be bursting at the seams.

Tiny wooden homes, poorly constructed, stood in rows on the northmost side of town, and the small marketplace was packed with every random thing imaginable for these people trying to make some money.

We were halfway through town before it dawned on me why everyone was staring. They were staring at me. Possibly the stranger, Gerard, too, but they were definitely staring at me.

“Your Highness!” a man called to Keltin as he ran up to him. “Where have you been? Everyone has been searching for your family and the guests from the ball. Prince Ulrich came by days ago and said the castle was infected with an illness and asked everyone not to snoop, but a group of men from Avare said they entered the castle and found it completely abandoned!”

Everyone nearby stopped and turned their attention to the crown prince.

Keltin nodded. “There has been a lot that has happened the past several days. The eve of the autumn ball, a spell—”

“Spot,” Gerard cut in. “A spot of illness fell upon the castle as Prince Ulrich said.”

Keltin gave him a disapproving look.

I understood Gerard was attempting to keep the peace by not letting magic-fearing people be any more frightened than necessary. There was nothing the people could do to help the castle, and worrying about magic was a bad idea.

“May we borrow some horses?” Gerard continued, offering his kindest smile while also looking a little bit like a vagabond.

“Strange company you’re keeping,” another man said. He was dressed in much finer clothing and had just arrived.

Keltin let out a sigh. “This is Gerard. He has been helping me.”

“And the beast?”

“People have seen them wandering.”

Gerard rolled his eyes. “As I mentioned to Chorse, Ulrich merely asked me to keep an eye on things until he returned.”

“He returned yesterday,” another man said.

Keltin and Gerard glanced at each other quickly. “I need two horses immediately. I’ll be sure they are returned.”

“Won’t you stay and have lunch with us?” the well-dressed man asked, smiling politely. He must have been a politician of some kind.

“I’m afraid we don’t have the time,” Keltin continued. “Horses?”

“This way,” someone said and directed us to a stable wedged between the rows of houses with a pair of miserable-looking horses. “I’m afraid they aren’t much, but they’ll get you to the castle by dawn.”

“Can we push them to have them there by nightfall?” Gerard asked.

The man shook his head. “No, not that distance. These horses are old, but they’re trustworthy. I suppose you could ride to Filone and see if someone has horses you can trade out for when you get there.”

Keltin immediately began saddling up the first horse. “Thank you. Again, your kindness will be repaid.”

The man nodded. “Just make sure I get my horses back. Plowing season starts up next week, and I need to get to work in my fields with them.”

Gerard also began getting his horse ready.

Within the hour, both horses were saddled, Keltin and Gerard were loaded up, and we were out of Bertold at a brisk trot. I jogged a safe distance from the horses so I wouldn’t spook them.

“His idea to stop by Filone is actually pretty good, if these horses are as old as he says. It will only be an hour out of the way, but if we can get fresh horses, we should be able to ride faster,” Keltin said.

Gerard kicked his horse into a run. “Let’s get to it.”

Our day was spent pushing the horses to run as long as possible, then trotting and walking, then back again until we reached Filone. The road curved to Filone or carried on across the Troll River to Avare.

But when we arrived at Filone, the people were far less than willing to help.

Keltin dismounted and approached a short, stocky man with the helmet of one of Arington’s soldiers, but he didn’t look the part. “Rowick, I need two horses.”

“And who are you?” the man barked.

“Crown Prince Keltin?” Keltin gestured to himself. “In case you didn’t notice?”

“There’s lots of rumors that—”

“I am aware,” Keltin cut in, growing more annoyed. “We just came from Bertold where Hembran gave us these horses to ride here. We need fresh steeds so we can get to the castle by nightfall. I fear Prince Ulrich may be walking into a trap, and we need to get there as soon as possible.”

“Prince Ulrich?” Rowick scrunched his nose. “He came through yesterday.”

Keltin licked his lips. “I heard. Which is why we need to get to the castle as quickly as possible.”

The man grunted. “And how are you going to *borrow* two horses? And how are you getting these back to their owner?”

“I’ll pay you to take them to Hembran.”

Rowick stuck his hand out.

“Do I look like I have a money pouch on me?” Keltin snapped.

Gerard put his hand on Keltin’s arm. “I have some. Return these horses and I’ll give you a gold piece.” He dug into his pack, produced a money pouch, and pulled out a single gold coin. “We will take two horses here as well. From your own stables.”

Rowick didn’t seem very happy about it but greedily took the money anyway.

The two boys got two horses who looked to be in much better shape than those being led off by a stable hand.

They proved it too.

The two were able to run the entire distance across the bridge and to Avare before night fell.



TWENTY-FOUR

WE WERE PASSING AVARE, SO CLOSE TO THE CASTLE AND THE when Gerard suddenly stopped and jumped off the horse. "Hop off."

I paused at his side and tilted my head at him.

"Keltin, stop," Gerard ordered.

Keltin raised a brow. "And why should I?"

Gerard ran after him, grabbed him by the arm, pulled him from the horse, and slammed him up against the side of a nearby building.

"Keep your hands off me!" Keltin shouted.

Gerard clamped his hand over Keltin's mouth. "Tell me where the autumn stone is."

"No." Keltin sneered. He swatted at Gerard. "Let go or I'll hit you."

I didn't know whether or not I should separate them. Keltin was my brother, but surely Gerard had a reason for suddenly being so firm.

"Tell me now."

"Why would I tell you? You haven't released Ismae's enchantment, the one *you* put on her. And what of the people in my castle?" He pushed against Gerard's grip.

Gerard leaned close, their chests pressed together, and he pointed at our castle. "Tell me. Were there always gargoyles on your castle?"

"Aside from the those that spit rain . . ." Keltin reluctantly turned his attention to our castle. "No."

Poised on the turrets and parapets were stone gargoyles of various sizes and shapes. All were winged creatures. I'd seen them before—when the barrier was breached.

Gerard released Keltin. "Don't you get it? Selina is here. *She* is the one who breached the barrier a few nights ago. *She* is the one who released those guards, and who knows what else. If I don't go in there knowing where that stone is . . ." His gaze darted to me. "She . . . she will torture the answer out of you both."

My blood ran cold.

He looked once more at Keltin. "Whatever you think of me, you must know I speak the truth right now. No matter what, Selina will *not* leave without that stone. Speaking honestly, I would rather not see you tortured."

Keltin shook his head. "I am the crown prince. When the king is unavailable, that crown falls on my head, that mantle upon my shoulders. The autumn stone belongs to the royal family, its power is what keeps us in harmony with the other three kingdoms."

Gerard let out a frustrated sigh.

"I cannot give you the stone unless you tell me why."

Gerard stared at him. He ran his hand over his face and turned to the castle.

I nudged his hand with my nose. "Tell him."

He turned his gaze down at me. "Have you ever wondered why your four kingdoms are trapped in seasons that never change?" He turned to Keltin.

Keltin shrugged. "The forces that be decided to make it so."

Gerard snorted. "No. A wizard enchanted those stones. Each of them. He gave them to the rulers of each kingdom. He had good intentions, but the act of giving that much power to common people and disrupting nature sent a shockwave of magic through the kingdoms. That is what resulted in your kingdoms being trapped in never-ending weather."

"If that's so, why haven't we heard of it?" Keltin demanded.

"Because no one remembers."

Keltin rolled his eyes. "That's rather convenient."

"It's one of those things that sometimes happens," Gerard said. "Just like I didn't know my enchantment on Ismae would bleed to the castle. The same thing happened with the stones."

Keltin turned to me.

Gerard sounded like he was being honest. He seemed to have warmed up to me, so why would he lie now? It didn't help that neither Keltin nor I had any experience with magic.

"The stone's location?" Gerard pressed.

"It's in a secret compartment. Take me with you, and I'll open it for you."

Gerard relaxed his shoulders. "I'll admit, I'm not sure the best way to approach this. I would rather sneak in the way Ismae and I did a few days ago, but Selina may wonder why I'm sneaking around." He started to pace. "If we just walk in, we risk facing her anger. She's likely torn apart the castle looking for that stone."

"Let's just do it," Keltin said. "We walk in, pretend to be shocked while you get to look like you knew all along. When you have the stones, you will

release us from our trapped seasons?”

“Yes. It may disrupt things for all of you but Terricina. With them being on the coast they’ll still be in summer but might have some temperature variation.” Gerard looked down at me. “Are you excited to go home?”

I was terrified. I had no desire to meet Selina. All I wanted was to be rid of the enchantment and to have Gerard tell me he was going to stay and teach me about magic.

“Ismae?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I am also very nervous, if I’m speaking honestly.”

“I understand.” Stretching, Gerard drew a big breath, then adjusted his pack. “I can’t use magic, so if something happens . . . let’s just hope nothing happens.” He grinned with a nervous edge.

We walked side by side around the town and through the main gates of the castle.

We all stopped dead in our tracks and Gerard muttered something in his native tongue. Two gargoyles stood at the gates, blocking them, but behind them was a group of men all wearing armor in the colors of Terricina.

“Ulrich is already here.” Keltin’s eyes lit up.

Gerard snagged him by the arm before Keltin could move. “Selina must have already found him and imprisoned him. We need to be cautious.”

“Then we need to save him,” Keltin said, trying to pull away.

“I don’t disagree, but we need to be careful.” Gerard ran his fingers through his hair. “This isn’t going to work.”

“We can do it,” I offered. “We go in, you tell Selina where it is, and the spells will be broken, and everything will be as it should be.”

Gerard drew another steadying breath. He approached the gargoyles. “I bring the crown prince and princess of Arington.” He gestured to Keltin and me. “I know where the stone is and need to speak with Selina.”

The gargoyles didn’t budge.

The sun’s rays still hung in the air.

Gerard stepped around them. “I just had to make sure. Gargoyles can’t move in the sunlight. I thought Selina would have found a way around that by now.”

A young man with shocking blond hair and a scar across his face approached Keltin. “Your Highness.” He put his hand on his chest and bowed. “Prince Ulrich went in yesterday to speak with you and didn’t come

back out. We can't get in. There's this . . . woman I've never seen before."

"Selina. I know. This is her grandson." Keltin gestured to Gerard.

The man's brows scrunched, and his eyes narrowed. "You? You stole the summer stone!" He drew a short blade and held it out toward Gerard.

Gerard didn't even flinch. "Sky. What a surprise," he mumbled. "I don't have it on me, so you might as well put your sword away. Besides—"

"Is he holding you hostage so he can get the autumn stone?" Sky interrupted, quickly looking at Keltin.

Keltin sighed. "More or less. But it's more complicated than that. He turned Ismae into a beast." He gestured toward me. "And everyone inside of the castle is under an enchantment as well. Unfortunately, Gerard is the only one who can help us."

Sky grumbled something I didn't quite catch, though there was a cuss word in there. He lowered his sword. "Get Ulrich back to us safe. He's going to be furious when he sees you."

Gerard shrugged. "If I cared, I wouldn't have done it."

Sky narrowed his glare again.

"Keltin, let's get this over with." Gerard gestured to the castle.

Keltin nodded to Sky. "I promise I'll bring Ulrich out. He will be safe." He started walking and muttered under his breath to Gerard, "You had better hope he's safe."

"As if I had anything to do with him being harmed if he has been," Gerard snapped back.

"Both of you stop," I cut in.

"She's telling us to stop arguing," Gerard explained to Keltin. "And she's right. Show me where the stone is. I'll take it to Selina, and you won't even have to see her."

"What if she is using Ulrich for bait?" Keltin asked.

"That's very much something she would do. I'll handle it."

"Then I will go to the dungeons first and get him."

Gerard turned his annoyed look to Keltin. "We need to get the stone first so Selina doesn't become upset. And *then* we can get Ulrich."

Keltin scowled but relented. He heaved the doors of the castle open and peered carefully into the hallway before entering. No sooner had we stepped in than I transformed back into my true self. It felt amazing, and I was both relieved and worried.

We walked down the hallway, toward the throne room.

Gerard suddenly grabbed me and slammed my back against the wall.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

Gerard didn’t hide his torn expression. I didn’t know if he could. He looked so heartbroken it made my own heart ache. He didn’t answer, but his brows shifted. He opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Gerard?” I whispered and reached my hand up to touch his face.

His expression softened. He closed his eyes and put his hand over mine before leaning forward so our foreheads touched. “In another life, Ismae. You and I . . . perhaps.” He pulled back. “I pray someday you will find it in your heart to forgive me.” He moved my hand to his lips and kissed my palm, his other hand still holding me tightly.

“Gerard, let her go,” Keltin said firmly.

The kindness and compassion disappeared from his face, and before I had time to respond, Gerard dragged me from the hallway into the throne room and threw me at Selina’s feet. I didn’t know what to expect, but I certainly hadn’t expected to see Selina sitting on my father’s throne.

“Gerard. Pleased to see you, darling!” Selina greeted, sitting upright in her seat. “This must be Princess Ismae.” She rose to her feet and then stepped down from the dais.

I got to my feet to face her woman to woman. I didn’t know what Gerard’s intention was, but my heart was pounding.

Selina took my chin and looked me in the eye. “Your enchantment on her was perfect. You need a little more practice, though, due to the bleeding effect . . .” She turned her head to a table piled with various items I knew had to be people.

“Of course,” Gerard answered. He stood with his hands behind his back, head erect, spine straight.

“You knew I’d come.” Selina released my face and turned to Gerard.

“I saw you breach the barrier a few nights ago.”

“And tell me why you needed to return to the woods after disposing of the prince there.”

“Because Ismae didn’t know where the stone was. We searched the castle, but she couldn’t find it. I had to get Keltin to tell me where.”

“And?” Selina raised her eyebrow. Her eyes slowly darkened, and her lips tightened. “Oh, Gerard. You didn’t think you could deceive me, did you?”

His brows dipped. "What do you mean?"

Selina's irises became as black as her pupils. She slapped Gerard hard enough he stumbled. "Where is the crown prince?"

I looked around frantically. Keltin had been there only moments before, right behind us. He'd objected when Gerard grabbed me so roughly, yet he was nowhere to be seen.

Gerard balled his hands into fists. He didn't touch his cheek in spite of the bruise already forming. "He was here."

"And now he's not. Which means only one thing. He went to get the stone himself, you foolish, worthless boy. Stop him now."

Gerard's shoulders lifted, and he took three quick breaths. He hesitated. I imagined it was because he wanted to look at me, he wanted to make sure I was going to be all right. At least, I hoped that was why he hesitated.

"As you wish." He bowed and turned on his heel.

I got to my feet and faced the sorceress who had ignited nothing but fear in Gerard.

"I find it oddly coincidental Gerard turned *you* into a dog." Selina's eyes were back to their normal hue of dark brown. "He's so loyal himself."

"Certainly, you are able to feel the magic attacking him," I said, avoiding her statement.

Selina examined me, assessed me with her gaze. Somehow it made me feel exposed and vulnerable.

"Of what do you speak?" she finally asked.

"Why, the Witch of the Woods. She said she knows you." I twitched my brow and wiped dirt from the knee of my skirt. "Were you her pupil?"

Selina laughed, but the sound was cold. "Me? *Her* pupil? No, my foolish girl. We attended the same academy years ago."

"Years ago? She looks like a wretched old woman while you appear barely old enough to be Gerard's mother, let alone his grandmother."

"Time passes differently for us," she replied simply. "But thank you for your flattering words." She began walking a slow circle around me. "There is something . . . different about you. Something magical."

I knew by her actions, and Gerard's reactions, I was treading on thin ice. One wrong move and the ice would give way. I nodded. "Indeed. I've learned the past few days I have the power of speaking and having those things happen. Gerard said I am an orator."

“Has this always followed you?”

“I suppose. Though, to be honest, I didn’t know until Gerard pointed it out.”

“No one suspected?” Her brows scrunched.

I shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know. If they did, they never shared concerns with me. But you failed to answer my statement about Gerard’s magical leech.”

Selina rolled her eyes. “Oh, dear Viviane, you’ve put an energy drain on him.” She returned to her seat on my father’s throne and crossed one leg over the other. Her fingertips rested on the arms of the chair. “Tell me more of your encounter.”

“Tell me more of Gerard first.”

The sorceress’s expression became amused. “He doesn’t share things with you?”

I folded my arms. “Can you blame him? Why would he share anything with anyone when he doesn’t have an opportunity to get close?”

“Power doesn’t need friendship,” she answered flatly.

“Very well. Just how powerful is he?” I didn’t mind keeping our conversation light. It kept my mind off Keltin and Gerard. I’d never been privy to knowing the location of the autumn stone, and it concerned me that Gerard had gone after Keltin alone. They already hated each other as it was. If Keltin attempted to use the stone to stop Gerard, who knew what the ripples would be. Or, as Gerard called it, the bleeding effect.

She raised her hand and examined her nails, then looked past her hand at me. “Gerard has far more power than he’s ever realized. His final lessons will begin once we have that stone, and he will finally recognize his true potential. You have no chance with him. I saw the way you looked at him. You must know one thing . . .” She lowered her hand and placed it on her knee, smiling like a predator ready to strike. “His heart belongs to me.”

Shouting from the hallway drew our attention to the door at the side of the throne room. The door shattered open, and a hunched gargoyle with ogre-like fangs, a head too large for its body, and massive bat-like wings entered carrying an unconscious Gerard in his arms. After he made it in—stepping with one leg and dragging the other—another gargoyle entered behind. He was far taller, had the same sort of ogre teeth and wide, flat nose, and massive wings. He dragged Keltin by the hair.

Keltin had hold of the stone creature's wrist, gritting his teeth.

His gargoyle tossed a red stone in the air.

Selina gasped, jumped to her feet, and threw her hand out in front of her, using magic to freeze it in the air. "You fool!"

She ran over and snatched the gem from the air and held it close to her face. She smiled darkly, and the stone glowed red in her palm. "Yes. Finally! They're all mine! It is time . . . How I've longed for this day. Eighteen years. I've waited and worked and fought for eighteen miserable years."

I ran to the gargoyle holding Gerard, disregarding my own potential danger in doing so. I touched Gerard's face, and his eyes fluttered.

"You used magic, didn't you?" I stated.

His lip tugged. "Only a little."

"She told you not to use any!" I scolded. "What if you run out?"

Gerard winked at me.

It startled me. A wink? In his condition?

"Her magic can't possibly be that strong," Selina said. With a scowl, she marched over and put her hand on Gerard's head.

He let out a shuttered breath, and his hand moved ever so subtly over hers, then out toward mine. Whatever he put in my palm felt warm, and it took every ounce of self-control not to open my fist and look at it. Something told me he'd just magically transported the autumn stone into my hand, but I didn't understand why.

"Her power is definitely stronger than I imagined," Selina muttered. She pulled her hand away, fingertips curled, and red smoke with green inside pulled away from his head. "I can alleviate the effects, for now, but you and I will need to pay Viviane a visit."

She looked at the gargoyle. "You may set him down. He's quite capable of walking."

Gerard stretched his neck when he was set upright.

"You and I shall go now." Selina headed for the front doors, examining the green orb which clashed with the red smoke around it.

"I need to break the enchantment first," he stated. "I'll be but a moment. You can wait outside for me." Gerard put his hand on my back and began guiding me out the side door.

"Gerard, darling. Why did Ungbert have to drag the prince in?"

Gerard shrugged. "Because he wanted to."

"And what spell did you have to use that gave you such a headache?" Her eyes pierced him.

Gerard held her gaze. "It was a simple set of spells to block his attacks and put him on his rear. Nothing major."

"I believe it may be in your best interest to punish him so he won't follow us, don't you?"

Gerard frowned and glanced at Keltin. "Follow us? Why would he do that?"

"You stole the stone from his hands. If you break the enchantment, he will gather his army and come after us, especially now he knows your name and where you are from."

"Yet he doesn't know where we are going," he countered.

I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Selina couldn't see Gerard's hand resting on my hip, but I felt his pressure increase with each moment we lingered, and in a few moments, I knew I would wince.

"Are you refusing an order?" Selina's voice sang.

Gerard swallowed. "Certainly not."

"Then make it quick." She turned and relaxed her stance with her legs parted, all weight on her right leg.

"I can't use my magic, Selina," Gerard answered cautiously.

"You have a sword."

"And what do you wish me to do with it?" Gerard suddenly snapped.

"Be creative!" She rolled her eyes. "Have you learned nothing from my teachings?"

Gerard's fingers dug into my hip.

I clenched my jaw. "Give him a scar," I whispered. "Slice him on the arm or leg or something."

"That isn't enough." He made the motion of drawing his sword, and it took shape as it had a few nights ago—a large sword glowing with purple energy.

"Why doesn't that harm you?" I asked.

"Because it's low magic and technically a part of me, since I've delved into the shadow realm." He let go of me and walked up to Keltin, who had grown silent.

Keltin met Gerard's gaze with stubborn ferocity. "What will you do,

filthy magic-user? Cut off my leg? Gut me like a fish?”

Gerard slowly lowered the tip of his sword to Keltin's left cheek. He lifted his chin. “This sword is part of the shadow realm. Once it pierces your skin, the shadows will seep into you. How long will you survive before the shadows take hold and drag you into their realm? I suppose we will see.” With that, he sliced the blade across Keltin's cheek down to his chin.

Keltin screamed out and jerked his face away.

“No!” I shouted and ran over. I grabbed Gerard by the arm, but it was too late.

The edges of the wound on Keltin's face were lined with black.

Selina laughed. “Such a good boy.”

Gerard's body bristled. “It is done.” He “sheathed” his sword, and it disappeared. He looked at Selina. “I will remove the enchantment. I recommend you get a head start, and I will catch up to you. Those who were affected by the spell will be exhausted for a while, and we will need that time to get ahead.”

“I'll meet you at the edge of the Weeping Woods.”

Gerard faced her and bowed low.

Selina said nothing.

The gargoyle holding Keltin shoved him to the ground and stomped after his mistress along with the other, and the creatures hiding up in the shadows.

I fell to my knees at Keltin's side and took his chin. “Let me see it. Oh. Keltin.”

Blood dripped from the wound, down his cheek and dripped off his jaw. Tears dripped down his cheek in spite of his efforts to hold them at bay.

I pulled my skirts up, grabbed the loose petticoat, and pulled it off quickly, then pressed it to Keltin's cheek.

He hissed and tried to turn his face away.

“I know, I know. We've got to stop the bleeding.”

“If your boyfriend hadn't . . .” Keltin started.

The words stung. Gerard wasn't my boyfriend, and he'd shown a great amount of mercy to Keltin by buying us time to find a way to heal the wound, whatever it was. At least it was my theory Gerard had shown mercy.

Gerard slowly crouched at my side. "All of the shadows are gone. I truly had no choice," he said to Keltin. "But I spoke the truth. That sword is from the shadow world."

"And how is this going to heal?" he shouted back.

"You're going to need to find someone very powerful with light or nature magic." He straightened and held his hand out to me. "Let's remove this enchantment once and for all."

I looked at his hand, then up at him.

"Go on," Keltin muttered, putting his hand over mine. "I can hold this to my face. I don't need you to do it. And, quite frankly, I tire of seeing you as a wolf. In spite of how you're less fussy."

I kissed Keltin's forehead and let him hold the petticoat to his cheek on his own before taking Gerard's hand and letting him pull me to my feet. He dropped it as soon as I was upright, though, and then walked out the door.

I followed after.

"You are the most confusing person I've ever met," I stated, snatching Gerard's hand the instant I caught up.

He looked down at our hands. "What are you—"

"You show mercy. You hand me the stone . . ." I held my hand out, exposing the stone before quickly closing it. "Why?"

"I . . . I . . ." He stopped at the bottom of the stairs. "I don't know. Ismae, I don't understand. Let's just . . . get this done with." He tried to pull his hand away, but I would hear nothing of it. He sighed. "Maybe I'm not ready for the last part of training. Maybe I don't want all of the power and pressure."

"Does she know?"

He snorted. "She'd bring me to the brink of death and retrain everything in me if I ever said that." He began ascending the stairs, and I walked at his side. "She'll never know. I will never tell her."

"What does she get out of it? Having you be so powerful?"

He swallowed but didn't answer.

I remained quiet, giving him time to think. It was a new thing for both of us, my silence. But if Gerard truly was the one I was meant to be with, the one who made me feel like home, he needed to realize it too.

We walked into my bedroom, and I went to the desk where the rose sat.

"Here it is." I picked it up and turned to Gerard.

It dissolved into ashes.

His eyes widened and he quickly stepped protectively in front of me in a fluid motion.

Selina leaned against the doorway. “I don’t understand what has gotten into you, Gerard.” She shook her head. “I’ve given you opportunity after opportunity, taught you everything I know, and you throw it all away for what? A pretty face?”

“What do you—”

Selina shouted and flung her hand out before her. A fireball erupted and flew toward us.

Gerard barely had time to put his arms in front of him, and I only had a chance to grab onto the back of his shirt. Somehow, his action had produced a magic shield, and the flames went overhead, catching on my bed and igniting it instantly.

I could lose the bed, I didn’t care. But Gerard’s body gave a slight shudder.

“You gave her back the stone.”

“Selina, it isn’t what you—” he tried.

The flames from the bed reached out like hands and grabbed on to his arm.

He cried out. With his free arm, he reached behind to hold me and stepped around my leg, pushing me away from the flames. He twisted his arm down, back up, and then extended his free arm to the fireplace. The flames flew across the room and landed on the logs. A force radiated from his palm into the stone fireplace, and a plume of built-up soot dropped onto the flames, snuffing them out.

He gasped for breath, and I caught him when he staggered to the side.

Selina didn’t let up.

She sent magic barrage after magic barrage, backing us up to the window. I knew Gerard didn’t stand a chance. He could barely stand as it was, but we were too high to survive a jump from the window.

I looked down at the stone in my hand. *If I have magic in me, awaken it. Show me how powerful I can be. Let me help save Gerard from this servant of darkness.* I closed my fingers around it, and the glow from the stone seeped between the gaps of my fingers.

“You can’t activate it!” Selina shouted. “You know nothing of what you

do!” Her eyes were wild, revealing the real beast in the room. She shouted in frustration, and a red orb of magic slammed into Gerard’s chest.

His body, in turn, slammed into mine, driving me back. The bottom ledge of the window reached just under my rear. My back struck the glass, shattering it.

I saw Gerard slowly turn and look at me.

I saw his green eyes widen in horror.

He reached for me.

I reached for him, and then he disappeared from sight as I plummeted to the earth.



TWENTY-FIVE

I LANDED ON SOMETHING SOFT BEFORE I COULD REACH THE orange feathers on whatever it was were so bright I had to shield my eyes.

The creature landed at the edge of the gardens, and Mathias took his true shape.

I gasped. "The rumors are true?"

"Of course they are," he said casually as he tugged on the sleeves of his shirt.

"But wait, what are you doing here?" I demanded. "How is it you didn't get turned into an object like everyone else in my castle? Did you escape that night?"

"Stop asking so many questions." He put his hands up but seemed more than a little relieved. "Tavia and I left during the ball. I . . ." He glanced around and lowered his voice. "I spotted someone and knew there would be bad luck to follow."

I glared and punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow! What was that for!" His brows pinched, and he rubbed his shoulder furiously.

"For not warning us! If you'd warned me about Gerard, I wouldn't have pricked my finger on his rose, and our *friends* wouldn't be trapped as inanimate objects!"

He ran his tongue over his teeth. "Yes, looking back, I should have done that. You've met Gerard?"

"Where is Tavia?"

His brows pinched, this time in pain. "She's . . . home."

I put my hand on Mathias's shoulder, the one I'd just punched. "Mathias, I know more than you think I do. Gerard and I have grown close."

He scoffed. "You and Gerard?" He looked me up and down. "You'll love Gerard over me?"

"Mathias—"

He held up his hand, stopping me. "How much do you know?"

"I know Selina wants all of the stones. Gerard said something about righting nature so our kingdoms are no longer trapped in their seasons . . ." I left the sentence hanging.

Mathias raised his brows and leaned forward. "Yet you know there's more."

"What is it?"

"I'd hoped he would have revealed something to you if you were so close." He sighed. "Selina has . . . enchanted my mother. I don't understand her power. Our mother has been very bitter toward Tavia, envious even."

"Your mother?" I gasped. "But she and Tavia are so close. Inseparable since your father—"

"Yet Selina has done something to her. If all she wanted were the stones, why would she need my mother? And why . . ." He shrugged.

"Why what?"

"Nothing."

I reached out and snagged him as he began to walk away. "Mathias, you know me. Something has happened in each of our kingdoms."

"Something driven by Gerard," he added coldly. "You don't see how dangerous he is? Ismae, he *killed* Elisa's sister and nearly destroyed her kingdom!"

I shook my head. "He has no choice. He serves Selina. If you only knew what she puts him through—"

"What she puts him through?" Mathias laughed. "Ismae, please. Don't fool yourself."

I clenched my jaw and stepped back. "You couldn't understand, Mathias. He has no one else. Not one other person to turn to. Selina is the only family he's known. He has no friends. He does her bidding—"

"To what end?" Mathias threw in. "Do you know what I think? I think he's gathering those stones not just to right nature but so he can use the power inside to rule all of us."

He grabbed my wrist and forced my hand open. The autumn stone dropped into his waiting hand, and he closed it.

"Mathias, what are you doing? If you don't want him to rule us, why are you taking the stone?"

He looked down at the royal stone of Arington. "To save Tavia. Selina trapped her in the mirrors." His brows softened and he looked at me once more. "She's ruining everything."

I put my hand on his chest. "I will help you."

He laughed. "How?"

“Turns out, I’ve got magic.” I smiled.

His brows lifted. “Oh?” He looked me over. “What kind of magic?”

“Something that has to do with saying things and making them happen. Gerard calls it orator magic.” I shrugged. “I don’t understand it yet, but I need someone to teach me. I don’t trust Selina, obviously, but perhaps Ulrich’s mom or even yours?”

Mathias shook his head. “If you help me, of course I will return the favor. But I’ve got to give this stone to Selina so we can save Tavia.”

“I suppose it’s inevitable, Selina obtaining all of the stones.” I bit my lip and turned my gaze to the sky. “I have to talk to Gerard. I’ve got to get him to tell me the truth. All of it.”

Mathias nodded. He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “I can say one thing about this curse of yours.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s changed you.” He gave me a small smile, and the corner of his lip tugged a little bigger.

“Let’s go save Gerard from Selina.”

“Good luck with that.” Mathias heaved a breath.

“So cynical. That’s your biggest character flaw, you know,” I pointed out.

“Let’s not get started on character flaws.” Mathias fell into step with me.

We paused beside the hedges. “Selina has Ulrich inside somewhere. Keltin has been cut with a shadow blade.”

“Undoubtedly the work of Gerard?” He raised a dark brow.

“Again, he didn’t have a choice,” I said firmly. “Maybe we need to use that stone to get Ulrich and Keltin out of here. Ulrich has also brought a small army with him. If we could get Ulrich and Keltin out to the army, we might be able to use them to fight against Selina somehow.”

Mathias eyed me uncertainly. He shifted his gaze up to the broken window.

There were flashes of red light.

My stomach rolled, and I tightened my hands into fists. Gerard was up in that room. I didn’t need to hear his cries to know Selina was punishing him.

I reached out and grabbed Mathias’s arm. “Please?” I whispered.

“I agree,” he finally said. “But be careful. She uses gargoyles.”

“I know.” I nodded and entered the familiar walls of the castle.

Mathias stayed right behind me as we crept along the empty corridor.

I didn't understand why the enchantment on the castle wasn't broken. Selina had destroyed the rose. Perhaps it was tied to my own enchantment. But that didn't answer why my enchantment hadn't been broken either.

The door to the dungeon was guarded by one stumpy gargoyle with a broken wing. He sat poised but with a bored expression.

Mathias put his hand on my hip.

I stopped and looked up at him.

His brows softened in an apologetic look. "If they see me, they will raise the alarm. You have to be the one to distract him. Can you do that?"

I was about to step out from my hiding spot when I realized how foolish that would be. I had orator magic, and this was the perfect opportunity to use it. I grinned and turned my attention to the tapestry hanging on the wall just across from the gargoyle.

"Wouldn't it be interesting if the pictures on the tapestry began moving?" I said aloud, though in a voice so quiet only Mathias heard me.

"I suppose," he answered, his brows knitting together.

The gargoyle suddenly perked up. He blinked and took a step toward the tapestry, leaning forward to get a better view. A second step. . . a third . . . and finally he was far enough away from the door to the dungeon.

I waved for Mathias to follow me.

We tiptoed behind the gargoyle, and as we hauled the ancient door open, I prayed the hinges wouldn't make a noise. Somehow they didn't, and we slipped through the doorway and down the dark stairs until we reached the main level where three torches hung on the wall, lighting the small space.

I'd been down there only a handful of times as a child whenever we were playing hide and seek and Keltin or Ulrich broke the rules and hid down there. It looked just the way I remembered it—cold, dark, and creepy.

"Ismae, is that you?" Ulrich asked, peering through the bars of his cage.

I grinned and ran over to him. "Of course it is. I came to get you out! Mathias, search the walls and see if the keys are hanging somewhere."

"She has them," Ulrich said with a sigh.

I put my hands on my hips. "That's a problem."

"How is it you're here?" Ulrich asked. "The castle has been abandoned since—"

"Not abandoned," I corrected. "Under a spell. And it's my fault. All of this." I stepped forward and took his hand. "I'm really sorry for how I

treated you that night. It was cruel of me. Will you forgive me?"

Ulrich gave me a surprised look, then glanced at Mathias. "Did she hit her head?"

Mathias shrugged.

"One good thing has come out of it, though." I stepped back. "You brought an army and we might be able to fight Selina. Or at least distract her. Your door isn't even locked."

"Yes, it is. I've been trying to open it all day."

I gestured. "Try now."

Ulrich frowned at me. He walked to his door, grabbed the bars with both hands, and heaved. The door swung open so quickly, he stumbled and hit the stone wall. "How is that . . . that shouldn't have worked."

"I'm an orator." I curtsied. "Now, let's get up to Keltin and get you both outside before Selina finds us out. Hopefully, the gargoyle guard is still distracted by the tapestry."

Ulrich looked to Mathias once again. "Is it just me, or is she—"

"Different? Yes. And to answer your question, she made the tapestry move."

"It's a little ironic she can use magic now."

"I'm right here. Are you coming?" I started up the stairs.

Mathias hurried past me, taking the lead up the stairs, and Ulrich followed behind me.

"I forgive you," Ulrich said.

I reached out, then took his hand, giving him a smile.

Mathias pushed the door slowly, peeking until he was able to get his head out. "It's clear." He pushed the door open all the way.

"Keltin is in the throne room," I said to Ulrich. "I'm going with Mathias to get Gerard. You take Keltin and get out to the courtyard. Tell your men to be ready to fight, just in case."

We rounded the corner and skidded to a stop.

The stubby gargoyle stood just feet away with a startled look on his stony face.

Mathias stepped past me and put his hand on the gargoyle's chest. Fire ignited around his hand and burned through the gargoyle, sending splinters of orange light and cracking his skin like fissures. The gargoyle tilted his head back and let out a screech so loud I had to cover my ears.

“That woke up the entire castle,” I pointed out.

Mathias turned to us. “Ulrich, get to Keltin and get him out of here!”

I ran past the exploded gargoyle, then turned the corner to run up the stairs. However, I stopped so suddenly, I tripped and fell to my knees.

Selina stood at the top of the staircase, gripping Gerard by the back of the neck. She made eye contact with me before shoving Gerard forward.



TWENTY-SIX

“GERARD!” I SHOUTED. I HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO WATCH HIM steps. I tried to run up them and stop him but stepped on the hem of my dress and fell once more.

After this was over, I was *not* wearing dresses anymore!

Something of Gerard’s popped. His head struck the stone steps. Finally he reached me, and I managed to stop him from rolling down the last four steps. I turned him over to search for any wounds. He had a cut above his eye, his nose was bleeding, and he was clearly dazed. I just couldn’t tell if it was from falling down the stairs or whatever punishment Selina had given him.

“Ismae?” He blinked at me, brows furrowed. He reached for me but winced. His wrist was at an odd angle—very clearly broken or out of place. “H-How did you survive the fall?”

I turned my head to the bottom of the stairs where Mathias stood.

“Of course,” Gerard mumbled. He tried to sit up.

“Easy,” I whispered.

He braved a smile. “I can handle bruises.”

I smiled back and wiped the blood away from dripping into his eye.

Mathias began his ascent up the stairs. “Selina, I’ve brought you the autumn stone.” He stopped several steps down and held his hand out, palm up, so Selina could see the gem.

“Wonderful!” Selina clapped her hands together. “And here I thought this was going to be difficult.” She reached for the stone.

Mathias pulled his hand away. “You will uphold your bargain and return Tavia to our world. That was the deal. I get you the autumn stone, and Tavia goes free.”

She folded her arms. “You very nearly failed.”

“Yet here it sits.” He raised his brows.

“I am a woman of my word.” Selina nodded her head. “There is just one thing I must take care of first. My foolish Gerard met with an old adversary of mine, and we must meet with her to dispel a little curse she placed on him.” Her gaze darted to Gerard and pulled her lips into an overexaggerated frown.

It infuriated me.

I looked at Gerard. He'd sacrificed *everything* in his life to her. He did everything she asked, and she couldn't even thank him for it?

"You don't have to go with her," I whispered to him. "You're powerful enough, strong enough you can do this without her. You know you can! You've got me now. And my friends."

Gerard turned his gaze away from me. "Your friends?" He scoffed. "They all hate me. You would never be able to convince them to help me."

"Stand, Gerard," Selina commanded.

Gerard gave me an apologetic look before obeying Selina once again. He tried to get to his feet but teetered to the side. I had to catch him.

Selina put her hand out and Gerard's body went stiff. He stood on the step beside me, spine rigid, arms straight down to his sides, chin up.

She ignored his cry of pain.

I couldn't.

"Enough!" I shouted, leaping to my feet. "You have no need to do this to him! You treat him like garbage!"

"Ismae, no," Gerard pleaded through clenched teeth.

"Because you and I have only just met, I will be gracious enough to grant you a warning," Selina said.

I was suddenly slammed against the wall by an unseen force.

"There." She walked down the steps. "Gerard, you have grown far weaker than I thought. I don't believe you will make it to Vivian before she saps every last bit of your power. To ensure you make it *alive*, a little friend of yours wanted to visit, and I think it is a wonderful idea." She gestured to the shadows in the ceiling.

Gerard's face paled as he shifted his gaze toward the shadow form slithering down the wall, dragging itself with long, clawed fingers that easily tore into the stone. "S-Selina. Please!" Gerard quickly looked at his teacher. His master.

"How else will you make it to Vivian, darling?" Selina inclined her head and looked him up and down, fake concern on her face. She touched Gerard's chin. "This is the only way to maintain your power. She will draw from the wraith instead of you. It's better that way, isn't it?"

Gerard stood trembling.

I tried to move but found it impossible.

The wraith poised itself.

“I’ve told him to behave himself,” Selina assured, sliding her hand around Gerard’s back, giving him a side-hug.

I looked to Mathias for help.

He shook his head, hands out as though to ask what he should do.

What *could* we do?

The most powerful of us trembled at the sight of the wraith on the wall and had been easily subdued by Selina raising her hand.

You gave me these powers, I said to whatever entity I was supposed to be speaking to. *Give me strength now*.

Gerard’s shoulders slumped, and he closed his eyes in surrender.

The wraith pounced.

I pushed away from the wall with everything I could summon and stepped in front of Gerard. Icy air slammed into me, tore through me, stole my breath.

And then I found myself standing alone, surrounded by darkness so thick I could see nothing around me.

“Ismae!” someone shouted.

I spun around.

Gerard ran to me and swooped me up in his arms. “You’re safe! You’re safe.”

The castle materialized around us from the floor to the ceiling. We stood in the ballroom. The torches were lit. Yet it was void of people.

“Ismae?” Gerard sounded distant. He set me on my feet and cupped my face. “We are safe now. I’ve decided to stay here with you. You were right. I don’t need Selina.”

I stepped back.

“What is it? Ismae?” My name echoed from his lips, all around me.

I looked around again. “This . . . isn’t right. I need . . .” I ran to the stairs and blinked away a flash of Selina’s cold eyes and, behind her, Mathias’s shocked face. “Selina. How did we get away?” I glanced over my shoulder and the castle remained as it had been just seconds ago.

Gerard stood still. “She got the stone. Mathias and she left.”

“She wouldn’t have let you go.”

The building tilted. I staggered and fell to my hands and knees.

“But she did.” Gerard crouched beside me and took my hand.

My hand.

His hand.

He held my hand gently to help me to my feet, yet I felt it gripping me tightly, squeezing. I could have sworn I heard him again, but his lips didn't move.

I focused on his face.

I finally saw it.

"Your eyes." I tried to pull away, but even though Gerard's hand slipped from mine, I still felt the intensity of his hold.

"What about them?" he asked.

"They aren't yours. They aren't green. You aren't Gerard!" I shouted and jumped to my feet.

His brows lifted.

The room around us dematerialized as did his façade. Instead, a stunningly handsome man stood before me. His black hair was longer than my own, and he wore a black tunic with red flecks that somehow reflected the light that wasn't there. It was gorgeous.

"Princess Ismae." He bowed politely, one arm behind his back, and the sensation of his touch disappeared completely. "You're brighter than Selina said you would be."

I folded my arms. "She underestimates me."

"Indeed, she does. As do you." He walked forward, smiling at me, revealing sharp teeth. "You know, you could be quite comfortable with me here. Unlike Gerard, I haven't been commanded to teach you any lessons."

My breath got caught in my throat. "You . . . you're the one who punished Gerard in the shadows."

He lifted the corner of his lip and hissed. "You speak as though I have a choice."

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes, but I won't share it with you." He examined his fingernails. "I'm afraid I'm too cautious these days." He lifted his gaze to me again. "Selina learned my true name long ago and, as a result, has enslaved me to her. Pathetic, I know, but I'm more cautious with my name because of it. You may call me Nicholas." He walked over and sat on a bed.

I hadn't noticed the shadows taking shape to a bedroom, but when he sat down, I took a chance to look around. "This isn't my home," I said firmly.

“But it can be.” Suddenly, he was in front of me, holding my chin.

“You aren’t a wraith,” I said. “I saw wraiths in the woods.”

The man smiled. “No, I am not. And I am not from this world.”

“Go back to where you came from.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes and let go. “As I said, I can’t. Selina controls me. What do you prefer to look at?” He gestured toward the room.

“I don’t want to see anything. I am done with your . . . mirages,” I said firmly.

The vision trembled violently and disappeared in an instant, leaving me alone with him.

His brows lifted in surprise. “An enchantress . . .”

I swallowed hard.

“Unlearned but with potential . . .” He began walking around me. “It’s too late, you know. I already possess you.”

I followed his movements, turning in a slow circle. “Selina wanted you to possess Gerard. Not me. So you disobeyed her order.”

He stopped. “Hm. Perhaps.”

“And what happens if I banish you from me?”

Nicholas slowly tilted his head to the side. “You think you are powerful enough to do so?”

“Where will you go?” I repeated.

He rolled his eyes. “You’re no fun.” He shrugged and leaned against a wall I couldn’t see. “I would go back to the underworld until Selina summoned me forth again. Takes time. I’m a rather high-ranking creature, and summoning takes quite the spell,” he boasted with a proud smile.

I felt arms around me then, cradling me close against their body. I closed my eyes and embraced that touch. Gerard was stroking my face. I knew it was him, I could smell him. He was whispering in my ear, but I couldn’t understand the words.

“Give in to me,” the demon commanded. He was holding my face again, leaning close enough I could peer into the depths of his eyes. “Grant me the right to stay.”

“Don’t let him stay,” Gerard said. His words rang through the room.

The man growled. “Ignore that.”

For a moment, I lost all connection with Gerard. All I could see was the man in front of me. The room around us was my bedroom, lit with

afternoon sunlight, and a fresh bouquet of flowers stood on my desk.

My door opened, and Ulrich stepped in. "Ismae, come join us! Keltin and I are going hunting. Your father approved."

My heart ached, and I slammed my eyes shut. "It isn't real!"

"If it isn't real, why can they touch you?" the man asked.

"Ismae, are you all right?" Ulrich put his hand on my arm. He smiled just like Ulrich. The playful glint in his eyes was just like Ulrich's. He gave my arm a tug. "Come along. Keltin is waiting."

If I stayed here, I could help Gerard. Selina needed this demon, didn't she? She had allowed him to possess me, for she would have drawn him out herself if she was upset with it. I could travel with them, and when Gerard needed me, I could snuff out the demon from my body and . . .

"All you have to say is you grant me permission," the man whispered.

I stepped toward Ulrich.

"That's it!" Ulrich laughed and held the door open. "This way, Ismae."

"Say it," the man whispered in my head.

Gerard's voice broke through once more, louder than ever. "I can't lose you, Ismae."

I took a step forward.

"I love you." His words rang through my mind, but his breath was on my ear. I was in his arms. He had been holding me, pleading with me to focus on his voice. He had been telling me not to listen to Nicholas's temptations. He had been pleading with me to come back to him.

Gerard's words shattered that unreal world.

I gripped on to those three words: *I love you*.

I looked the man in the eye and smirked triumphantly. "No, Nicholas."

His lips tightened. "We will meet again."

"No, we won't. Leave. Return to your world of shadows and darkness! I banish you!" I shouted.

He growled and his eyes flashed red.

My eyes snapped open.

Gerard let out a shuddered breath and he pressed his head to mine. "Don't do that . . . ever again."

I grabbed his face. "Gerard," I said firmly. "I'm not leaving you. I will never abandon you. I will always sacrifice myself for you."

"She'll . . . kill you."

“Then let her. But I finally found someone worth holding on to.”

All the barriers came down. Gerard pulled me against his chest and crushed his lips to mine. All time melted away. I didn’t care that we were surrounded by chaos and creatures of darkness. I forgot about the sorceress standing feet away.

Gerard’s warm lips were moving with mine and an electric tingling radiated through me. I felt him to my core. Our magic touched and a small burst of energy exploded around us. Gerard slowed the kiss, and I reluctantly leaned back. His eyes were clear for the first time since meeting him.

They glittered with light.

He put his hand on my cheek and rubbed his thumb over my chin. “I’ve never . . .”

My lip twitched, and I stayed expectantly silent, waiting for him to finish without interrupting.

He smiled. “I’ve never felt like this before. I don’t understand what you’ve done.”

I put my hand on his chest. “Selina doesn’t own your heart yet. I believe I might have touched it a little.” I winked.

Selina glared down at me. “Well, I certainly underestimated you, didn’t I? A worthless child with the power of persuasion has seduced you, Gerard, and you didn’t even realize it.” She grabbed my wrist and pulled me away from Gerard’s arms.

“Stop!” Gerard got to his feet again but stopped when Selina pointed a finger at him. “Selina, please. She’s not a threat to you!”

“Oh, but she is. As long as she can manipulate you, she is a threat to me.”

I turned and faced Selina, unable to stop the grin on my face from forming. “I frighten you? You see me as a threat.” I pulled my arm away from her and stood proudly. “I am Ismae Pandhurs, proud daughter of Patrick and Gemma. Gerard doesn’t need you, and you don’t want him to ever realize that. Maybe not today, but I will use my power to stop you.”

“Or you won’t.” Her eyes darkened. “I hope you enjoyed your time with Gerard because you’ll never see him again.” She snapped her glare to Gerard. “You and I go to Vivian now.”

He didn’t move. He kept his gaze on me.

Selina shouted in anger. She threw a ball of red energy and it struck my

chest.

Pain exploded through me. I collapsed in a heap.

“You can’t leave me,” Gerard said desperately, clinging my body close to him. His eyes were wet. Green, like summer grass and leaves.

Summer. We hadn’t had summer in ages.

He said he would fix that.

Gerard put his hand on my cheek. “Ismae, stay with me. I n—I need you.” He drew a shaky breath and slowly let it out. Tears brimmed his bottom lids.

My body felt so tired. I lifted my heavy arm and touched his cheek with my fingertips. “Why?”

“Because you’re the only person I’ve ever trusted. You’re my one.”

I tried to keep my arm up. I wanted to kiss him. But my arm fell, and I smiled. “You love me?” I whispered. I felt my body relaxing like I was on the brink of sleep.

“Ismae? Please.” His voice was so distant. “Don’t go! Don’t! I . . . do. Yes, I love you. Ismae!”

“I . . . love you . . . too.”

My world went black as Gerard pressed his lips to mine.



TWENTY-SEVEN

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, I FOUND MYSELF SITTING ON A PL Sunlight spilled through tall windows. I blinked and the whiteness took shape. Gold bordered the walls and framed the windows, and gold leafing wrapped around the railings of the stairs. Those stairs led to the second and then third floor.

My gown was a simple white dress with flowing sheer sleeves, and it only went to my feet, which were adorned with silver glittered slippers. It took me far too long to fully wake up and stand.

The walls were lined with rows and rows of books, from floor to ceiling, and each floor had nooks with a plush seat, pillows, and plenty of light.

In the center of the library stood a statue of a man in robes holding a book open in his palms.

I ran up the nearest staircase, my fingertips tracing the smoothness of the railing, and I picked up the first book on the shelf. But as soon as my fingertips touched the leather, my heart sunk.

I wanted to share this with someone.

“Gerard.”

The book fell from my hand, and I turned to look once again at the library. The *empty* library.

“Gerard!” I shouted. My heart raced, and I put my hand on my chest.

Just moments ago, he had been holding me. He’d admitted he loved me. He’d begged me to stay.

I was dead.

This was my heaven, or at least my afterlife for whatever period of time that was.

I grabbed my skirts and ran back down the staircase, across the marble floor, and to the enormous gold doors. I grabbed the handles and pulled them open. Sunlight blinded me as I stepped out, but I didn’t slow down. I entered a garden with white flowers of every kind and tall trees that dangled with long green leaves and featherlike flowers.

“Gerard!” I cried again.

My heart ached.

I had just found someone to love. I had finally found someone who

understood me, who I related to, who I wanted to open up to. And I'd died? Life was cruel.

Helpless, and feeling more alone than I'd ever felt, I turned in a circle as if that would help me locate Gerard.

My heart jumped when I spotted a gold dragon lounging under the canopy of one of the trees. His eyes smiled at me.

"You. Do I know you?" I asked.

"No. My name is Quist." He rose to his feet and towered over me as he approached, yet I wasn't afraid.

I licked my lips. "Gerard. I need him."

"I heard you calling for him. I would assume he is the boy you've fallen in love with?" He sat on his haunches, looking rather like a cat.

I nodded, my heart racing once again. "You don't understand. He . . . I'm not a good person. Not really. Not like Elisa or even Keltin. Keltin is my brother."

The dragon chuckled. "I know you, Ismae Pandhurs. I am also familiar with Gerard. Many times have I tried to reach him and been unable to, so I began searching for help outside."

My brows scrunched. "Wait. Quist. I've heard that name."

He nodded. "I visited Elisa when she was learning the truth of her heritage."

I gasped. "You're the ghost dragon?" I looked around again. "I really am dead?"

"I'm afraid so."

I tightened my hands in fists and glared at nothing in particular. "Do I have to remain dead?" I turned back to the dragon. "You clearly visit others."

"I'm not technically dead. I'm sort of . . . stuck between worlds, which is why I'm able to visit."

"I don't want to be dead. I need Gerard. He needs me too. He finally found someone to love, and then . . . and then I died." My lips trembled as tears came to my eyes, and I wiped at them. "Please. Please tell me what to do to get back to him. I'll do anything. I'll give up my magic. I'll even remain a beast if I must! Just let me get back to him. Please." I hated that I sounded like a child.

Quist leaned his nose down to me. "I know how you can get back to him,

but the way will not be easy.”

I wiped at my eyes, determination filling me. “I’ll do it. Just tell me what to do.”

“Gerard has already entered the underworld and searches for you. You broke his curse just as he broke yours. His power has been restored, but he is still weak from the energy that has been taken. He risks being lost.”

I rounded my shoulders. “Quist. Tell me what to do. I’ll face anything for him.”

The dragon studied me with eyes that read my soul. “I know you would. Whatever you do, do not let go of the rope.” He stood and walked me to the edge of the garden. “Step through this portal and you will enter the underworld. There is a rope, your rope, your strand that will return your soul to your body. Don’t let it go no matter what.”

“But it won’t take me to Gerard.”

Quist chuckled. “He is a necromancer, dear child. He knows how to follow your soul strand.”

I stepped up to the marble archway and stared at the rippling air before me. “Is there anything else I need to know?” I looked up at him.

“You already know what to do. Don’t doubt yourself when you face Selina again.”

I crouched and grabbed the golden rope at my feet. “One more thing. Pants. You wouldn’t happen to have any of those?”

Quist laughed, the deep sound feeling light. “You have magic.”

“It works here?” I grinned and looked down at myself. “All right, magic. Give me a proper pair of trousers, tunic, and vest. Let others say what they will, I’m not tripping on my skirts while trying to escape.”

My flowing white dress transformed into white pants, a white tunic, and silver vest.

“Perfect! Thank you, Quist.” I nearly stepped through the portal when Quist stopped me.

“I did forget to mention one thing. Gerard hasn’t shared the entire truth about the stones. He collects them because his father made them. He wants to right his father’s wrong but while proving he is a better man and wizard than his father ever was. Remember to tell him his father yet lives. Gerard can help him.”

I nodded. “I’ll remember.”

“Good luck.”

I wrapped the rope around my hand and stepped through the portal.

My breath caught.

I didn't know what I expected to see on the other side. I'd always imagined the word *underworld* to mean fire, brimstone, barren ground. Instead, there were floating platforms with strands of rope disappearing into the darkness around me. I couldn't see anything to walk on.

I swallowed my fear.

I had to get to Gerard, no matter the cost. I wasn't leaving him alone. Not now.

I took my first step off the ledge and fully expected to fall.

Only, I didn't.

Somehow my feet touched unseen solid ground.

I drew a breath, feeling much braver, and began the ascent. The rope led me up a gradual slope, and then to a cliff face. I clung to the rope with both hands, planted my feet on the stone, and gritted my teeth while I climbed the short distance to the top of the cliff. Already, my hands ached, but I wasn't giving up.

I rubbed my hands on my pants, careful to switch the rope from one hand to the other. Quist had told me not to let it go, and I wasn't going to.

The rope, or soul strand, entered a dark cave.

I held up my right hand. “Faerie fire, come to me. Show me light.” An orb of blue light grew in my hand until the space around me was lit.

Overhead, millions of red dots appeared, and my whole body went rigid. My mind went back to that night in the cave with the shadow bats that had attacked me. If they were from the underworld, these were the very same creatures.

“I can do this,” I whispered to myself. “Ismae, you can do this. For Gerard. If for no one else, do it for him.”

I released a shaking breath and tore my gaze away from the eyes.

Each step gave me more confidence.

Ahead, I saw a doorway with light glowing through the gap around it. I kept my eyes focused on that as I walked.

I'd nearly reached it when I heard the footsteps running around me. The same sound from that night in the caves.

My heart jumped into my throat, and I tightened my grip on the rope.

I wasn't letting go.

I wasn't giving in to the fear begging me to peer behind me and see what presence I could feel.

"Almost there," I said aloud. "I won't look at you! If I can't see you, then you aren't there," I insisted.

Shrill screeches echoed overhead, wings flapped, and the winged creatures descended.

I gripped my soul strand tighter as the bodies of the winged creatures blocked my view of the door. They pulled my hair and slapped into my face, closing in and stifling the light from the faerie fire. As they drew near, I finally saw them.

They had the bodies of birds with long feather-covered legs that ended in talons, yet their faces were those of women. Their fangs nipped at me, and their claws scratched at every exposed part of me, over and over. I'd seen paintings of them in ancient texts.

Harpies.

My heart hammered against my ribs. "You won't defeat me!"

I held the light up and searched the innermost parts of me for whatever it was that would make the fire grow. I remembered the night with the shadows from the creatures who broke through the barrier, when Gerard had used light magic. I couldn't recall his words, other than, "Allul!"

I shouted it with everything inside of me.

The faerie fire exploded.

The harpies screamed.

They retreated, clearing my path to the door. I ran for it, not looking back. I grabbed the doorknob, turned, and pushed it open. I stumbled through, then spun around and slammed it shut behind me.

When I blinked, I realized the door was familiar. It was carved with the images of leaves, and I knew immediately that I stood in front of the main doors of the castle.

I quickly turned.

The castle's great hall lay before me.

Hundreds of people were packed inside, all wearing their best, their faces glowing with anticipation and joy. Flowers stood on tall pedestals, a gold and red rug lay on the floor, leading to the end of the hall, and it was there my father stood with Mathias.

Mathias wore his best.

I knew what this was.

My wedding.

I swallowed. This was much harder to disperse as not being real. I could smell the white and pink tulips as I slowly walked down the aisle. Music floated to me.

This isn't real. None of these people are real. The sights, sounds, faces—they're all fake. They're here to throw you off.

I spotted Elisa standing with Dormir. Tavia stood at the front beside her mother. My mother stood with her as well. Keltin stood behind Mathis. All of them wore proud smiles, but I didn't reciprocate. This was an illusion.

I reached the end of the aisle.

Mathias stepped forward and extended his hand. "You look positively radiant, Ismae."

I took his hand.

He smiled and guided me to step up beside him.

This was wrong. I didn't want to marry Mathias.

"You're helping both of our people, opening new trade routes," Mathias whispered. "I will treat you like the queen you deserve to be."

I knew he would. Mathias had always respected me, always been honest with me, and truly would treat me like a queen. He would value my opinions and thoughts. If I had to marry Mathias to do the best for both of our kingdoms, who was I to say no?

"Ismae!" a voice called.

I turned to see Gerard standing in the middle of the red rug, panting from running.

"You can't marry him! I love you!"

My heart jumped into my throat. "Gerard!" I dropped Mathias's hand and ran toward Gerard. My soul strand pulled tight. I jerked to a stop and looked at the rope I'd wrapped around my wrist, then to Gerard.

"Come with me." He smiled hesitantly and held his hand out. "Be with me. I love you."

The only way I could walk to him was to let go of the rope.

"I'm right here, Ismae. Come with me. I'll show you Ashwrya. You'll rule so much more than Arington and Zelig. Just take my hand and go with me."

I slowly unwrapped the rope but held on to it.

I raised my gaze to Mathias, who stared at me with a look of shock and betrayal.

Was this scenario truly playing out? Was this Gerard *my* Gerard? Had he come all the way to the underworld for me to leave him behind?

Slowly, I faced Gerard again and looked him in the eye.

Black eyes.

I glared. "Nicholas."

Gerard's lips curled in a grin and everything around me disappeared. "You have to give me a score of ten for that. How could I resist trying again?"

I held tighter to my soul strand.

"After all, you *are* the one who sent me back here." He approached me as I stepped away. "Imagine my utmost shock when I saw you step out of your haven. You could have been happy there for the rest of eternity."

"I wouldn't be happy without those I love."

"Gerard, specifically." Nicholas stopped a safe distance from me, still looking like Gerard. "What did you hope to do when you reached the black door? You can't cross through it. No soul can open that door."

He gestured behind me. The throne room was gone, but my rope had reached a massive black door.

"I know that isn't real," I replied.

"How is that?"

"Because Gerard is a necromancer, you fool." I faced Nicholas. "He is in the underworld searching for me. Considering I haven't found him yet, that door isn't really there."

Nicholas rolled his eyes. "Of course he would make you believe he's coming for you." He sighed. "Ismae, Gerard doesn't know how to love. He has no heart."

"He has enough of one! I know he does. Because I love him." My heart jumped. "I love Gerard with every part of me, and I *will* find him and return to him."

Nicholas smirked. "I think you believe that."

"I do. No, I know. I know. Because I love him." I turned and marched to the black door with determination.

"You can't get through," Nicholas tried once more.

“Watch me.” I grabbed the handle, and it opened.

Light sparkled around me as if I stood amongst the stars.

And Gerard stood in front of me, blinking in surprise. “Ismae?”

“Gerard?” I looked him up and down.

“I’ve been standing at that door for hours trying to figure out how to get it to open. How . . . how did you open it?”

“Nicholas said I couldn’t, so I did.”

He smiled. It was his smile. His eyes. “It’s really you?”

I rose to my toes and threw one arm around his neck and planted a kiss on his lips.

He wrapped his arms around me, hoisting me off the ground. “Ismae, I’m so sorry I let you die.”

“Shut up. You didn’t let me do anything.”

He set me down.

“And you came back.” I reached up and put my hand on his cheek.

Gerard pressed his lips to mine softly, one more time. “Let’s get your soul back in your body. Unfortunately, this is the upper level of the underworld, which means you’re more likely to see dead things. You can close your eyes if you want to, and I will guide you through.”

I took his hand. “I met Quist.”

He stopped walking. “What?”

“He told me to tell you something important.”

“It can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” I insisted. “He said it’s really important for you to know your father isn’t dead. And you’re the only one who can help him.”

Gerard’s brows furrowed. “That’s not possible. He died when the stones split.”

I shrugged. “I just saw a ghost dragon who says otherwise. Maybe you should put your faith in him instead of in a sorceress bent on killing the woman you love and destroying all of your happiness.” I raised my brows.

He chuckled and sighed. “I suppose you’re right.” He began walking again, still holding my hand. “I still don’t know what I’m going to do when I get you all sorted. I suppose I should start by making sure Tavia is safe. I don’t trust that Selina will uphold her end of the bargain with Mathias. She’s vindictive that way.”

I stepped closer to Gerard when I felt the air around us drop. “What is

that feeling?” I whispered.

“The dead,” he whispered back.

Wisps of voices, like dry wind, growled around us.

And then I saw them—skeletons of every kind at varying degrees of decay. They reached for us. They grasped at my rope, but their hands went through. They closed in around us and some grabbed at my shirt and pants.

“Gerard!” I said nervously.

“I’ve got you. Don’t let go of your soul strand.” He released my hand and slid his arm around me. “Back, I say!” he commanded the skeletons.

A few of them fell away, but more scrambled up.

“They know we’re leaving,” I said.

Gerard stopped. He crouched, quickly wrapped his arm around my thighs, and lifted me into the air.

I gasped. “Gerard!” I tightened my arms around his neck and tried to hold my own weight while the skeletons grabbed at my feet. “Run! You can make it. I can use magic and hold them off!”

Gerard grunted.

I reached out to the light, to the joy in my soul. The air around us began to radiate white light.

“What . . . what are you doing?” Gerard asked.

“Calling on the light,” I replied. “It’s all around us. I realized if I just reach out to it, I can bring it to me. I can use it.” I smiled at him.

The worry in Gerard’s green eyes disappeared and was replaced with determination. “I love you.”

“I know.” I smiled and kissed him.

The skeletons dropped away.

Gerard hauled me up to the inky black pool above us. “This will feel weird,” he warned before he stepped out.



TWENTY-EIGHT

EVERYTHING WAS A MESS OF SOUNDS AND LIGHT. PEOPLE around, but I found myself without the energy to ask Gerard if they were living or dead.

Gerard gently set me on my feet. "Lay down on your body."

I turned and looked down. It was surreal standing over my body. My skin was gray, my braided hair a mess from traveling and transforming back and forth between wolf and girl, and my clothes were filthy. How had Gerard ever seen me as beautiful in such a state?

I saw Keltin kneeling beside my body and ironically staring at me, or rather my soul, as if he'd seen a ghost.

I offered him a weak smile.

"Ismae, now," Gerard insisted.

I looked at Gerard before I lay down. Rejoining my body felt a little like waking up from a night terror and wondering if you'd woken into reality or if you'd woken back in the nightmare.

Exhaustion made my limbs heavy.

As I blinked, my father's and mother's faces came into view.

"You're alive!" my mother exclaimed. She brought my hand to her lips and kissed it, then stroked my face with her long fingers.

Father grinned beside her.

Keltin was gripping my other hand. "H-hey," he whispered with hesitation.

I blinked a few times while everything came back to me. I gasped and bolted upright. "Selina!"

"Easy," Father ordered. "You just came back to life."

"Gerard." I pushed at them, trying to get to my knees. "Gerard!" I shouted, panicked.

"He's unconscious," Keltin answered quickly.

I was in my room.

My brows furrowed and I looked around. "Wasn't I just in the throne room?"

"Hours ago," Keltin explained. "When Gerard brought your soul back, you showed signs of life, but you've been asleep all night."

“Night?” I looked at the window and saw the sunlight pouring through. I smiled and looked down at myself. “The spell is broken. Everything is as it should be?”

Keltin smiled. “Yes. Everyone is back, and Elisa has been waiting for the word to come visit you.”

“But Gerard,” I insisted. “Please tell me where he is.”

“He’s resting in my room.”

I scooted past him, and Keltin shot an annoyed look to our parents.

“Let her go,” Mother said.

“Can you stand on your own?” Father asked, already at my side and holding my elbow.

I slowly rose to my feet, testing the strength in my legs. I appeared to be holding up, so I nodded. “Yes. I can do it.” I didn’t care that I was in my nightgown or that I was barefooted as I hurried to the door. Indeed, I still felt weak, but I was *not* going to show my family and have them drag me back to bed.

When I opened the door, the sounds of the castle greeted me, and my heart leapt with joy. *This* was how the castle was supposed to sound.

I hurried to the other side of the hallway, to Keltin’s room, and burst in. I was surprised to see Gerard was awake and sitting on the bench in front of the window.

He turned quickly when the door crashed against the wall behind it. His eyes sparkled when he spotted me, and his lips spread into a grin. “Ismae.” He jumped to his feet and ran to me as I ran to him, and he scooped me up into his strong arms.

“You went into the underworld for me,” I said, holding on to him tightly.

“Of course I did.”

I closed my eyes.

“I had to. I . . . care for you.”

I pulled back and raised my brow. “When I died, you used a different word.”

Gerard’s pressed his forehead to mine. “You have a way of making my brain and tongue disconnect. I love you.”

“I knew it.” I leaned up on my toes and kissed him. “I love you too, you know.”

He gave me a proper kiss. Something at the tips of my toes ignited and

shot through me. Joy. Pure, unequivocal joy. Gerard slid his hand up into my hair and held my lips to his. His other arm pulled me against his muscled body, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was mine.

He was my home.

We both gasped for breath when we separated, and I burst out laughing.

Gerard joined me but barely loosened his hold.

I rested my cheek on his chest. "Selina is gone?"

"She left after she killed you. I was furious. When I admitted my feelings for you, and you reciprocated, both of our enchantments broke. I gained my power back from Vivian. When I turned to Selina . . . for the first time in my life, she was afraid of me."

I looked up at him, eyes wide.

Gerard smiled. "It's true. She backed off. She told me to meet her at the border by tonight. She wanted to pay Vivian a visit for what she did to me."

"Are you going to go?" I stepped back so I could get a proper look at him, but I didn't dare release him. I didn't want him to leave now that I finally had someone to love me.

Gerard rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know. A part of me knows I need to learn whatever she is going to teach me. I started this and . . . and it's my birthright to see it through to the end. But at the same time, I want to go to Zelig and check on Tavia. Selina took Mathias with her." He shook his head. "There are a lot of decisions to make, and I need to be careful which to choose."

"What will Selina do if you don't show up at the Weeping Woods?"

He remained silent, but worry caused his brows to pinch. "I don't know."

"You're more powerful than you realize," I said, using the words Quist had said. I took his hands. "Gerard, you can defeat her."

"From doing what? All she is doing is gathering the stones." He heaved a sigh. "The last part I have to do alone."

"She benefits from having you on her side, right?"

"True." He tilted his head to the side and shook it. "Ismae, have you ever heard the tale of Tern Tovan?"

I shook my head. "I've heard the name before, but that's it."

"He's my father." Gerard straightened and let go of my hands to walk to the window. "He was a very powerful enchanter and the king of a kingdom known as Fidsa. Arington, Griswil, Zelig, and Terricina were all realms of

this kingdom.”

“What are you saying?” I asked in a soft voice.

“I’m saying I’m the rightful heir to the throne. The rightful king over all four of the kingdoms.”

I stared at Gerard. I’d always just thought him to be a powerful wizard and hunter from Ashwrya. And there he stood, telling me not only was he from our area, but he was the king of some kingdom that existed ages ago?

“I know it doesn’t make sense to you now,” Gerard continued, “but you asked me to be honest with you. Yes, we need the stones to return things back to the way they should be, but there’s more. When I rejoin those stones, it will break the spell on all of Fidsa, the realms will remember, and I will be king.” He nervously put his hands in his pockets, then pulled them out and tugged on the bottom of his shirt. “Say something?”

“I don’t know what to say,” I admitted. “It seems a little far-fetched.”

“Considering I just dragged your soul out of the underworld, I fail to see how this is more far-fetched than that.”

I shook my head. “I mean, why is it no one remembers?”

He shrugged. “I was an infant. My mother got me out before everything broke. It probably has to do with the effect of the magic. I don’t have all of the answers.”

“Wow.”

“Now you know why I have to go with Selina. I have to take my throne.”

“So you’re just going to disrupt everything we’ve done the past several years?” I folded my arms.

He hesitated. “I thought . . . you would . . .”

“I’m not upset,” I quickly said and hurried over to him. “You can’t blame me for being . . .”

“Scared?”

“I don’t know that scared is the right word.” I reached up and touched his cheek. “Confused. There’s so much I don’t know about, especially when it comes to you. But I meant it when I said I’m here for you. And I want to help you. And I meant it when I said I love you.”

He put his hand over mine and leaned down. “I was afraid you would run screaming for help.”

I laughed. “No.”

He pecked my lips. “I don’t want you to follow me yet. I’ll send you

some books about your magic. When things relax, I'll make sure you learn how to use magic properly. I know you're going to have the tendency to practice, just be really careful okay?"

"Me? Practice?"

He raised his brows knowingly. "You're like me, remember?"

"You can't really expect me to find this new power and *not* try and use it." I tilted my chin down and looked up at him.

"Of course not."

"I'll have to get magic allowed in the kingdom again before I try exploring my powers. I can't afford to get thrown in prison."

Gerard took my chin. "Just be careful. Magic can consume you. You'll feel the pull start to burn in your chest and that's when you let go. Otherwise, you could end up killing yourself."

I smiled nervously. "Right. And I'm supposed to do this on my own."

Gerard hesitated. "You don't have to. You can wait until I return. For now, I have to go." He rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip. "I'll come back for you. I promise. When things are safe."

"You better. Or I swear I'll come get you. Even if I have to figure out how to open a portal to the underworld." I threw my arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss.

"I kind of miss your horns."

I laughed.

We both turned when someone knocked on the door.

My father smiled. "Forgive me for interrupting, but we were going to have breakfast. Gerard, we would be honored to have you join us."

"Honored? I'm certain Keltin or Ismae have told you what I've done." Gerard glanced at me and then back to my father.

"I witnessed how you returned my daughter to me, how you saved my son from the Weeping Woods, and I was told you helped break the enchantment on the castle."

Gerard flinched. "I'm the one who put the—"

Father waved his hand dismissively. "Enough of that. Come eat with us." He walked away, giving Gerard no opportunity to argue.

"You don't *have* to stay." In spite of the words leaving my mouth, I already had his hand in mine gently leading him toward the door.

"I don't, do I?" He chuckled, his shoulders relaxing. He followed me, but

when I looked over my shoulder, I noticed his gaze darting toward any sound.

I gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “You’re as skittish as a cat.”

“Can you blame me?” he asked. “I’ve offended nearly everyone here.”

“Now you’re being dramatic.” I laughed and stopped to face him. “Gerard, do you remember what I was like when you met me? I was a beast, as you put it.”

He averted his gaze.

“You changed me in that short period of time. Maybe not all the way, but I’ve changed a lot. Why couldn’t you change too?” I put my hand on his cheek.

“People like me don’t change.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Says the boy who saved me when he could have left me for dead, who dragged me out of the underworld, who saved my brother, who—”

“I think I get it.” Gerard smiled, but his attention was suddenly drawn behind me.

I turned to see what—or who—he was looking at. Keltin stood with his arms folded across his chest.

“Shouldn’t you be coddling Ulrich?” I teased.

“He’s at breakfast, waiting. I thought I could keep an eye on you.”

I drew in a slow breath, stopping myself from saying something I shouldn’t. In spite of everything we’d been through, Keltin still didn’t trust Gerard. Gerard had quite literally walked through death for me. “We’re going to eat breakfast. Why don’t you join us? You’ll keep a much better eye on me down there with food.” I held my hand out for Gerard to take.

He slipped his long fingers between mine and followed me down the stairs.

We arrived in the dining hall and I spotted Ulrich standing just inside the door.

He turned, grinned at me, and pulled me into a hug. “You’re back to normal! And still alive!”

I gave him a squeeze back—a familiar and comforting feeling. “I’m sorry for how I treated you before.” I pulled away. “But you have to give me credit, if I hadn’t sent you to prison, you would have likely ended up a vase. Where is your army?”

“They’re getting ready to leave. We’re going home today.”

“I bet Keltin isn’t too pleased about that. Especially since you two spent the past week forced apart when you should have been celebrating.” Giving Ulrich a nudge toward Keltin, I laughed.

Gerard stood awkwardly, trying not to draw attention to him, but I directed him to the long table where James and Odette were seated, along with the blond boy—Sky—next to them. Mathias must have been forced to go with Selina, and Elisa and Dormir were nowhere to be seen.

When I asked about them, Keltin gave me an apologetic smile. “She heard Gerard was here and left immediately.”

“To be expected,” Gerard muttered under his breath.

I prompted Gerard to sit beside me, and within a few minutes, the food was brought out—an enormous, proper breakfast to make up for the one we missed the day of the autumn equinox.

“A little odd eating in here with a room full of people, isn’t it?” I said to Gerard, who hadn’t spoken a word since sitting down.

“I’m not typically in situations like this. At least, not where people know who I am.” He cast me a glance.

I put my hand over his when he reached out to grab his fork. “My father didn’t have you arrested for the use of magic. That’s something.”

Gerard’s lips slowly lifted in a smile. “Speaking of which, have you told them about yours?”

“Your what?” Ulrich was sitting across from me, his fork now frozen between his plate and his mouth.

I looked down the table, then to my right, where my father sat.

He dabbed his mouth with his napkin. “Was there something you wanted to discuss?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “The law about magic. What Ulrich did, what I put him in prison for, wasn’t anything to have been punished for. Not only that, but Gerard’s magic kept me safe more than once while we were breaking the enchantment on the castle.”

My father’s eyes narrowed at Gerard. “What are you recommending?” he asked, his voice still even.

“Simply? I recommend we allow magic in the country again. Gerard was right when he said we shouldn’t punish everyone for the mistakes of one person.”

Father pulled his lips in a frown, but his gaze relaxed and turned to Mother. “I believe it’s something we should discuss.”

I grinned and nudged Gerard. “Little steps, right?”

Gerard’s lip tugged at the corner. “It’s time for me to go, I’m afraid,” he said, looking as reluctant as I felt. He scooted his chair back and stood.

“You don’t—”

“I know,” he interrupted.

I rose to my feet and walked by his side to the front of the castle. One of the servants handed Gerard his bag. “Just come back to me, okay?”

He shouldered the pack and then gathered his hair to tie in a ponytail. “I’ll be back before you know it.” He winked.

“You better.” I wanted to reach out and grab him, kiss him, lock him up, and not let him return to Selina.

It was Gerard who drew me near and gave me one last kiss.

“Bye,” I whispered.

Watching Gerard leave was one of the hardest things I’d had to do—aside from crawling out of the underworld. My heart ached as he walked away, but I knew I had a job to do while he was gone.

I turned to my parents, who had followed us. “Now, about the barrier . . .”



EPILOGUE

AS MUCH AS IT TORE ME TO LEAVE ISMAE, I HAD TO.

She helped me replenish my pack before giving me a final kiss and sending me on my way. I wanted to stay behind and celebrate that the guests had all been returned to normal, that things were back to how they should have been.

But I had to get to Selina.

My hands balled into fists the instant I spotted Selina standing impatiently at the edge of the Weeping Woods. I put my hands behind my back so she couldn't see and straightened my spine.

Mathias stood a safe distance away. He nodded subtly to me.

"Thank you for gracing us with your presence." She folded her arms, seeming far calmer than she'd been the day before when I almost attacked her for killing Ismae. Her raven sat on her shoulder, its head turned and dark eye locked on me.

"I am very weak," I answered. "Vivian took much of my energy when she tried to take my power."

Selina shook her head. "You continue to disappoint me, Gerard."

For once, I didn't care. Ismae had been right. I didn't have to do this. I could leave once my powers were returned. Maybe, just maybe, there was a way to do this without Selina's help.

"You're deep in thought." Selina's voice dragged me out of my haze of thoughts, and when I lifted my gaze, she had her chin lowered and her lips were pinched. She'd always been impeccable with reading my body language but didn't have the same ability as Vivian in being able to read my thoughts directly. For that, I was extremely grateful. My life would have been far worse if she had *that* capability.

"I just want this over with," I muttered.

"Oh?" She laughed and reached a slender finger up to stroke the breast of her raven. "Don't tell me you're not ready to be king."

I resisted the urge to flinch, though my muscles tensed. "You know that isn't what I said. I've helped you collect every stone. I'm tired of lies and deceiving others."

"Hm." She returned her gaze forward. "Let us pay Vivian a visit and we

will return to Zelig to get Tavia back to Mathias. We'll go from there."

I twitched my brow but remained silent.

Selina entered the woods, expecting Mathias and I to follow. We reached the small cottage far faster than I recalled reaching it with Ismae, and I knew Selina had to have used magic, I just hadn't paid enough attention.

The exterior of the cottage hadn't changed.

To my surprise, Selina knocked on the front door. "She already knows we're here," she explained unnecessarily.

The door swung open on its own, and Selina entered without hesitation.

I glanced at Mathias.

His lips were in a thin line, and his shoulders were slightly lifted, showing his discomfort.

I entered the house and was surprised when I spotted Vivian.

Vivian stood in the sitting room looking nothing like she had only a day before. The sticks that were growing out of her head were far shorter and a beautiful bright white like birch trees instead of brittle and old. Her skin was flawless, youthful, and her eyes were a deep shade of gray instead of white. She wore a stunning, form-fitting black dress with a gray fox pelt around her shoulders.

"At least you put my powers to use," I grumbled.

"Good to see you again, Gerard," she said casually, but her gaze didn't leave Selina. "And Selina. Welcome to my humble home. Though, you would know all about it, wouldn't you? Seeing how you banished me here."

"I see your vanity hasn't left you." Selina looked her up and down, lip curling in disgust.

Selina's raven flew into the cottage and perched itself on the statue of a Valkyrie—a woman with a winged helmet, flowing cape, and raised sword sitting upon a flying steed.

"And you are one to speak?" Vivian laughed, the sound bright, but a deep evil echoed inside. Vivian turned her attention to me. Her breath caught, and she took me in. "Dear Gerard, you look rather . . ." She smirked and gestured to a mirror hanging on the wall. "Well . . ."

I turned my head and saw how feeble I looked. My shoulders were hunched, my skin pale and gaunt against my face, even though I'd slept well the night before. For a moment, a skeleton's face flashed over my own, and I shook my head.

Vivian tsked. "You're lucky I didn't kill him. Poor thing."

"Correction, *you* are lucky." Selina gestured to me. "Gerard, how do you propose we carry out a punishment on this wretched creature?"

Vivian's eyes ignited with anger, a deep green glow of magic beginning in her pupils. "I recommend you choose your words carefully, Selina."

Selina's feigned kindness slowly melted from her face. "Vivian, you seem to be mistaken. You feel as if you have more power here than I." Selina took two smooth steps forward and gently stroked the tail of the fox's pelt around Vivian's shoulders. "You and your stolen power."

"I wouldn't have to steal it were it not for you holding something very dear to me."

Selina's gaze darted to Vivian's face. "Ah, yes. Do you wish to see him?" she whispered, darkness dancing in her eyes as they slowly grew entirely black.

For the first time since our arrival, Vivian's stony expression faltered. Her brows pinched and her shoulders rose.

Selina straightened and settled her hand on Vivian's shoulder. With that hand, she turned Vivian to face the mirror. "Mirror, mirror on the wall . . ." The surface rippled, and our reflections faded away.

I took a step back.

"Show the greatest traitor of them all."

Vivian's body began to tremble. "Selina, don't do this."

Selina ignored her.

Moments later, the face of a man appeared. The man's hair and beard were black, long, and appeared as if they hadn't been washed in ages. His piercing blue eyes had no inner light until they settled on Vivian's face.

"My Vivian?" His voice croaked as though it hadn't been used in as long as he'd been clean. "Look at you . . . not a day older."

"My love." Vivian tried to step forward, but Selina's grip tightened. "How I miss you so."

"Gerard." Selina turned to me. "I ask again. What is the best way to punish Vivian for her foolishness in stealing your powers and using them for her own benefit?"

I heard Mathias suck in a breath.

I wasn't in the mood to appease Selina, but I was already going to be punished for fighting her and saving Ismae. Once again, Ismae's words

came into my mind, reminding me that I didn't have to help Selina. I was more powerful than her. That was why she'd been so frightened of me when she'd killed Ismae.

Everything Selina did was to control me.

When I became king, she would be on my right hand as the kingdom's sorceress. If I lived to become king. What if everything she was doing was so *she* could run the kingdom?

"I am speaking to you," Selina said sharply.

"I heard. I was thinking." I stretched my fingers. "I can't do this with you."

"Pardon me?" Her eyes widened in shock, and her lips sat open.

"I'm not doing this with you anymore. I'm taking the stones and doing this on my own." I turned my gaze to Mathias. "Let's go." I motioned for him to follow me out the door.

"How dare you! After everything I've done to raise you!" Selina snarled.

The door slammed shut in front of my face, locking Mathias outside.

"I will give you one last chance, Gerard. You've been through a lot the past couple of weeks, and you must be feeling overwhelmed." She approached me, and I allowed her to put her hand on my arm. "I can't imagine how much stress is resting on your shoulders. Stay here."

I glanced at the door. *No handle. Great.*

"Vivian, to punish you, I'm afraid I must punish Halfdan."

"He has already been through enough!" Vivian snapped, stepping in front of the mirror to protect him from Selina. "You possess him *and* his heart. What else could you possibly want?"

Selina tapped her plump lips. "I can offer you a trade. Give me your heart and he won't be punished."

Vivian froze.

"Don't," Halfdan said. There was a hollow thump as if he was pounding against the mirror. "Vivian, don't do this! Not for me!"

"You're the only thing I have left." She looked over her shoulder at him, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

"And when you give her your heart, you won't have me at all. You have already nearly faded, imagine how much worse it will be if you no longer have it."

I tried not to relate to them, to not see Vivian as Ismae if she and I were

torn apart.

“I’m waiting,” Selina sang, tapping her toes on the wooden floor. “I’ll give you to the count of five. One . . . two . . .”

“Wait,” I blurted.

Selina turned to me so slowly. I felt the weight of her glare before it reached me. Her phantom claws grazed my throat—a warning—and swallowed nervously.

“Why do you need it? Her heart? Why need any of them?”

Selina spun on me. With a snap of her fingers, my teeth slammed together, and my lips were sealed shut. Before I could think of a counter spell, a magical needle pierced my lips, stitching them together. I tried to scream a counter curse to dispel the magic, but my inexperience betrayed me and my lips were sealed shut, effectively silencing my ability to cast any spell against Selina.

Selina faced the Witch of the Woods once more. “Vivian. Choice?”

“I give you my heart.”

“Vivian, no,” Halfdan begged, his tone defeated. “Don’t do this for me. Please, my dearest. Please . . .”

“Good choice,” Selina smirked. She stepped forward and placed her hand on Vivian’s breast. “You owe a fee, and so it shall be, give your heart to me.”

Vivian gasped.

The man in the mirror let out one final sob before Selina motioned with her free hand, and the mirror returned to normal.

She pulled her hand back, and a red orb glowed in her palm. The same red glowed in her eyes. “Thank you, dear Vivian.” She reached into the pouch on her hip and produced a wooden box large enough to contain the heart. Once she placed it inside, the bronze raven on top magically etched the word: Vivian Raylin Proshwitch. “I shall call upon you soon to fulfill your indebtedness.” She gently placed the box into the magical pouch.

Vivian clutched her chest, gasping and panting as tears coursed down her cheeks.

Selina grabbed my arm. “Come, Gerard. We are finished here.” She motioned me to the mirror. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, open the portal to Zelig.”

The mirror rippled once more, but this time, it didn’t reflect anything

back at all.

The raven flew from its perch on the Valkyrie statue and landed on my shoulder. It nibbled at my hair, and I swatted at it, furious with myself for being such a fool. I'd had a chance to get out and should have used my magic when I had the chance. I should have followed Mathias outside. Should have cast a spell before my lips were sealed.

"With Vivian's heart, I'll remind you who you belong to," Selina growled in my ear.

Selina dragged me through the mirror.

I'd made a fatal error in leaving Ismae.

She was right that I should have stayed with her in the castle where she could have helped me understand what it meant to have someone to care for, and I could have helped her understand her magic. Instead, I was now hopelessly trapped by the very woman from whom I should have fled.

I needed to rid myself of Selina once and for all. I just didn't know how.

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Personal dragon trainer, lover of glitter, super nerd.

Lichelle Slater lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, with her adorable King Charles, Perseus. When she's not working full-time as a special education preschool teacher, she's living in the worlds she creates and shares with readers, painting, or doing any other assortment of crafting. One thing is for certain—you'll always find a dragon in her stories.

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